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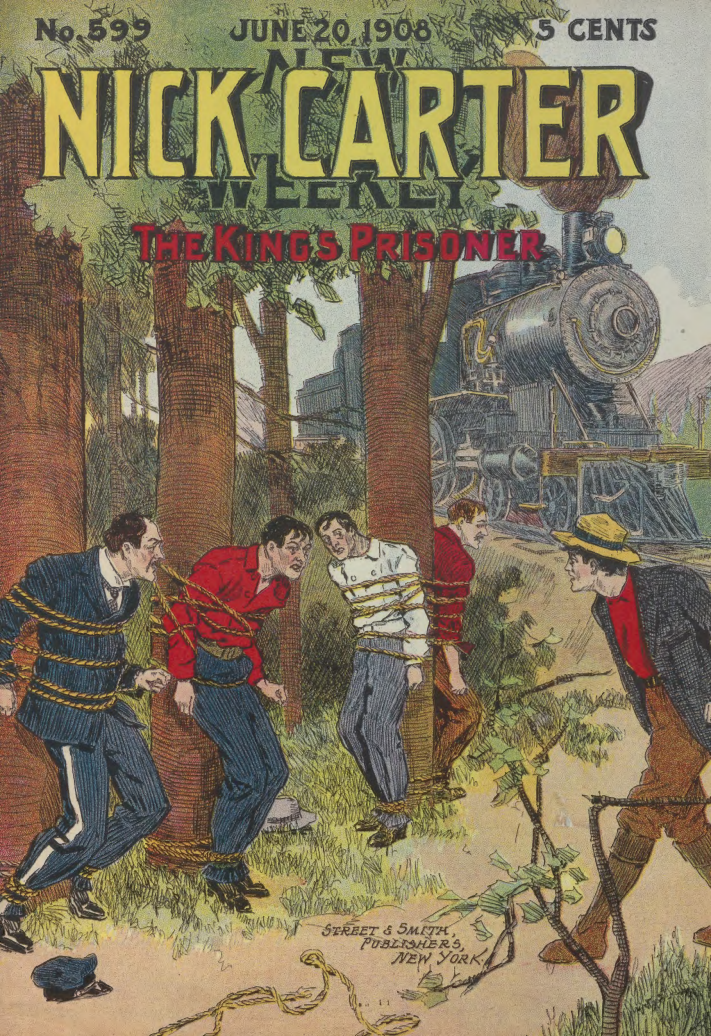
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE KING'S PRISONER



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE KING'S PRISONER;

OR,

PATSY PLAYS A LONE HAND.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA.

Patsy glanced at the card that was given him and saw at a glance that it was Prince Rupert who had called upon him. It was just two weeks to a day since, with the aid of Colonel Fritz Hensau and the Countess Zita, who was now the colonel's wife, and with the assistance of his own beautiful wife, Adelina, he had captured Count Herbert von Linmark in his own castle in Cretonia and brought that warlike gentleman to Breslin, as a prisoner of the king.

And Patsy and Adelina both felt that the time of their stay in the city of Breslin was near its end; in fact they were at the moment the card was given to Patsy discussing the expediency of taking their departure the following evening for Paris, where they wished to use up another week in sight-seeing.

They were still at the Hotel Gretz, where they had been royally housed and cared for as guests of his majesty, the king, and nothing had been neglected that could in any way add to their comfort or to their pleasure.

Countess Zita von Strellwitz-Hensau and her husband, the newly made count, had become almost inseparable companions and altogether Adelina and Patsy both felt that they had had the time of their lives since they came to Breslin.

Prince Rupert, the king's younger brother, entered the room presently, and at once announced:

"I have come to-day at the solicitation of his majesty, my brother. He directed me to take you back to the palace with me, Patrick, and also to say to madam that her majesty the queen, and her royal highness, Princess Deehra will be glad if she will accompany us to the palace where they may have the pleasure of her company."

"I suppose that all this softly spoken message really takes the form of a command," said Patsy, laughing. "Help yourself to a cigar, prince, unless there is necessity for haste."

The reader is advised to read the preceding issue of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 598, "Patsy's Vacation Problem."—EDITOR.

"Well, it is proverbial that kings do not like to be kept waiting."

"Then his majesty wishes to see me at once?"

"Yes. I believe so. At least he gave me so to understand."

"I hope that another revolt has not broken out in Cretonia."

"Oh, no; I think not. And yet I believe his desire to see you has something to do with Cretonia, at that."

"And therefore with Count Herbert, eh?"

"Naturally."

"By the way, prince, has the count ever been told the truth about the matter of his capture?"

"In what way? How do you mean, Patrick?"

"Does he know, now, the real identity of the four gipsies who captured him and brought him away from Castle Linmark?"

"No; I don't think he does."

"I wish you were positive about it."

"I am. No; he does not know."

"Possibly he suspects—or may suspect Fritz and Zita."

"No; I do not think so. It would be about the last thing that he would believe Fritz Hensau capable of accomplishing, and he certainly would never associate Zita with Zara, the gipsy."

"Nor, for that matter, would he connect Fritz with Fernand; or Patsy Garvan with Tricio, or my wife with Arla."

"He certainly would not do that for the very good reason that I do not believe he has ever heard of either of you. You came after he had retired to his castle in the mountains and had sent the letter of demand to the king, and when you four brought him back here as a prisoner, he was placed in solitary confinement and has not been permitted to speak to anybody save his jailer, since that time. And even the jailer will not answer questions, if he asks them."

"It is all a little bit tough on him, isn't it, prince?" said Patsy, after a moment's thought.

"I can see in it nothing more than he deserves, Patrick."

"Huh! Not half so much. You should have been there when he was trying to buy Adelina from me with his gold."

"I wish you would tell me about that. I have never heard the story quite straight."

"Oh, there isn't much to it. You saw how beautiful Adelina and Zita both were, when they were made up in their gipsy costumes. You needn't blush, Adeline; it is true."

"I can vouch for that," said the prince.

"Well, as I suspected would be the case, the count fell in love with Adelina, as the gipsy Arla, the moment he saw her. We had given him to understand that we were on our honeymoon-trip and he supposed we had been married according to some sort of heathenish rites practised among the people we pretended to belong to. He also supposed that as a gipsy, I would think more of gold than of my bride, and he offered to give me all the gold our horses could carry if I would go away and leave her there for him. He said that he would marry her at once; that he was soon to proclaim himself king of Cretonia, and that she should be his queen. We drugged him, you know, with the dose he had prepared for Adelina, and afterward, when he came to himself, he was on the back of a horse traveling toward Breslin, and his eyes were bandaged so that he could not see. That was all there was to it. I have often wondered, though, just what happened at the castle when all those men he had there woke up the following morning."

"It was a great stroke of genius all the way through, Patrick. You deserve great credit——"

"The credit, my dear prince, belongs to the ladies. It was Adelina who planned the thing; and it could not have been carried out without both of them."

"Well, the king is waiting. Shall we go?"

"Yes. I wish you would tell a fellow what he wants, though?"

"I would if I knew; but I do not. All that I do know is that for the last hour he has appeared to be greatly worried about something. I am to take you to his private smoking-room and not to the cabinet—and I am to leave you there with him."

"What! Is it something that even you cannot hear?"

"He wishes to see you alone. That is all I know."

"Count Herbert hasn't escaped, has he?"

"That would be an impossibility."

"Well, perhaps; but men in his fix do impossible things at times. I have known of such cases."

"I hardly think that the count has escaped."

"Let us hope not."

The drive to the palace was a short one. When the party arrived, Adelina was taken to the apartments of the queen, and Patsy was conducted by the prince straight to his majesty's smoking-room.

"Come in, Mr. Garvan," said the king. "Rupert, I will send for you presently—within the hour."

"Very well, sir," replied the prince, and withdrew.

For several moments after that the king remained quite still, puffing at his cigar and not speaking at all; and Patsy, who had already learned to know his peculiarities, waited in respectful silence until he should speak.

"Don't think me discourteous, Mr. Garvan," said the king at last. "The fact is, I am troubled. I want your advice."

"Am I competent to advise with your majesty?"

"Indeed you are. You are more than competent."

"In what way can I advise you, sir?"

"I want you to tell me what to do with my prisoner?"

"What to do with your prisoner, your majesty?"

"Confound it, yes! With my prisoner—the king's prisoner, if you like it better that way. Personally I don't care much what becomes of Count Herbert of Linmark; but as the king, I must do something—or I must give an account of this matter in full."

"Oh! I begin now to understand your majesty."

"Don't you see that I simply cannot let this thing get out, in its entirety?"

"I see very plainly that it would be extremely bad politics to let the whole truth about what has happened be known; yes."

"It can't be known. It must not be known. It shall not be known."

"Then what is the matter?"

"The matter is that everybody is wondering what has become of Count Herbert, and people are beginning to suspect that I know."

"Oh; I see."

"I don't suppose he was entirely secretive about his plans for setting up a kindgom of his own in Cretonia; or if he was, some of his followers there have come into Breslin and have told enough about it to make suspicious ones think that I somehow got wind of the matter—as I did—and sent out there and captured him."

"Well; are you obliged to explain your acts to your subjects?"

"No; but I don't want my subjects to suspect this particular act. Understand me——"

"I think I do, sir."

"I was going to say that I don't care a fig what they may think I have done with Count Herbert, *but I don't want them to know my reasons for doing what I have done.*"

"In a word, you don't wish the truth about the incipient revolt in Cretonia to get out."

"No; I do not."

"Well, then, why not let the curious ones clamor all they please, and you turn a deaf ear to it all?"

"No. Mr. Garvan, here is the situation in a nutshell."

"All right, sir, let me hear it."

"I have simply got to do one of three things."

"One of three. What are they?"

"I must take my choice between a private execution of the count, for treason—and I cannot do a thing like that; or I must deport him out of the country somewhere and warn him that if he returns here he will be arrested for treason and executed—*or*—I must turn him loose again—liberate him—set him free."

"But great Scott, your majesty, you can't do *that.* The count would go straight back to Cretonia as fast as he could get there, he would reorganize his forces, and—there would be the very devil to pay in about seven minutes by the watch."

"I know—I know. But what am I to do?"

"You must not do the last, that's sure."

"I agree with you entirely," said the king.

CHAPTER II.

THE KING'S PRISONER.

"What's the matter with doing as you suggested as the second alternative? Why not send him out of the country with a warning not to return?"

"Because he would not heed the warning. He would come back at once, and defy me. Don't you understand that he knows how utterly reluctant I would be to disclose all that happened in Cretonia?"

"Yes."

"And again, even if he did not return here and openly defy me, in a sense, he would find a way to sneak back to Cretonia, and reorganize his forces there."

"Yes; I think you are right about that."

"Well, that disposes of two of the courses to choose from. There only remains the private execution—and Mr. Garvan, I cannot have him murdered."

"I should say not."

"Well, you understand now why I have sent for you."

"Why don't you keep him where he is, your majesty?"

"Because it is utterly impracticable."

"But why?"

"Count Herbert has powerful friends, not only in this country, but in the adjoining ones."

"What of it?"

"They are beginning to make inquiries."

"Well, what of that, too?"

"They will presently discover a means of finding out where he is, and when they have ascertained that much, they will have the right to demand of me why he is there?"

"I see. And you don't want to answer that question."

"No; I do not."

"Your majesty, as nearly as I can make it out, you are in something of a pickle."

"I should say so!"

"You cannot keep him where he is—for obvious reasons. You cannot turn him loose—for obvious reasons. You cannot deport him out of the country—for obvious reasons; and there are equally obvious ones why you can't murder him. He is a sort of white elephant."

"He is that."

"Has your majesty talked with him at all since he was brought here to Breslin?"

"I have not even seen him."

"I wonder if he has any idea how he was captured, or who it really was who did it?"

"He cannot have."

"The prince told me that the count is imprisoned in the fort."

"He is not."

"Where is he?"

"In a dungeon here in the palace. It is almost directly underneath this room where we are seated now, two stories underground."

"One of the private dungeons of the palace, I suppose."

"Yes. I have thought, Mr. Garvan, that it might not be a bad idea if we—you and I—were to go down there together, and have a talk with him."

"Humph! I don't know about that. He would probably spot me at once as the gipsy who played the trick on him."

"You might fix yourself up again to represent the gipsy."

"Yes. I might do that—if you think it advisable."

"I sent for you to have you think for me."

"What good does your majesty hope to accomplish by interviewing the count in his dungeon under the palace?"

"I don't know. I am not aware that any good could come of it; and yet by that means we could feel his pulse, so to speak. We could discover what he is likely to do if he has an opportunity to do anything."

"I could tell your majesty that without visiting the man."

"Doubtless. So could I, I think."

"Still, I have a fancy to see him and talk with him for all that. Who has the prisoner in charge?"

"Two of Hensan's men, whom he specially selected."

"When would your majesty like to take the time for that interview?"

"Now. Right now. I am impatient."

"It will require at least an hour for me to return to the hotel for the necessary costume, and then to return here and prepare myself."

"Well, do it. I will wait for you here."

"If your majesty will permit me to advise——"

"That's what I sent for you for; to advise. What is it now?"

"I would suggest that your majesty make use of that hour in taking a ride on horseback, through the royal park, with some of your lords in waiting."

"Why?"

"Well, it will serve to change your thought, it will get you out of this seclusion, and it will brighten you up so that you will be in better condition for the interview."

"Very well. I will do it. Do you think you will be back here in an hour?"

"In one hour and a quarter I will await your majesty in the apartments of Prince Rupert, dressed as the gipsy Tricio, and ready to visit the dungeon with you."

"Good."

Patsy had himself speeded back to the hotel in an automobile, and there secured the things necessary for what he was to do. Then he returned post-haste to the apartments of the prince, who had been taken into his confidence on the way out, and there he dressed himself in the disguise, using a stain that he could readily wash off after the interview was over.

In descending through the palace to the part of it that was below the ground, they used the private stairways, and therefore he and the king made the passage unseen.

The dungeon, as the king had said, was two stories underground, and it was finally approached through a long corridor that reeked with dampness and smelled vilely for want of ventilation.

The jailer who had the prisoner in charge during

the day was quartered in a room where there was light and ventilation, just outside the end of the corridor. He offered to accompany them down the stairs and along the corridor, but the king took the key from his hand and told him to remain where he was.

His majesty had no fancy that even that guard should hear what passed.

"Your majesty will stand behind me when the door is opened," said Patsy, as they approached the dungeon. "The man might attack you when the door swings back."

"If my orders have been obeyed, he is in chains," said the king grimly.

"Oh! Well, chains are heavy things to hit a person with."

"These should be fastened at one end to the stone wall of the prison."

"You didn't mean that he should get away, did you, sir?"

"No; but I can't help wishing that you had dropped him into that moat that surrounds his castle."

"It would have made things a bit easier and pleasanter for you, I admit."

The door to the dungeon was of plate iron, held together with rivets.

"How does the man get any ventilation in that place?" asked Patsy, while he took the key from the king's hand and prepared to open the door.

"There is a stand-pipe that reaches from that dungeon, and from all the others in the palace, also, to the roof," was the reply.

Patsy shrugged his shoulders and proceeded to unlock the door. He was not accustomed to having to do with political prisoners, who are always more jealously guarded than criminals of the worst sort.

Before he opened the door he leaned over and whispered in the ear of the king:

"Remember, sir, that while we are here you must address me as Tricio. Please do not forget it."

"I won't."

The prisoner rose from a couch where he had been lying as they entered, and Patsy saw not without surprise after what he had heard, that aside from the chains that bound him to rings in the wall and which were long enough so that he could walk two-thirds the length of the dungeon-room, he had been made quite comfortable.

The couch was well supplied with blankets; there was a small table near it; a lamp was burning on the table and there were several books scattered about it.

The count had been reading when they came to the door, but now he threw aside the book and swung himself around till he faced them; but he did not attempt to rise, although he might easily have done so. His refusing to do so was a deliberate insult to the king.

But then his glance fell upon Patsy, in his character as Tricio, the gipsy, and he started to his feet with a cry of rage, but only to drop back again with a cold smile on his face, and his gaze sought the face of the king again.

"Why do *you* come here?" he demanded, making the question sound as coarse as he possibly could.

"I have come," said the king, "to find if you are prepared to listen to reason; but your attitude toward your king does not promise much for it."

"I have repudiated my king and my country," was the cold reply. "I owe you no allegiance, and shall give you none, ever again. If that is the sort of reason you wished me to talk, you have it."

"You are a traitor, and are guilty of treason."

"Then have me so charged and brought to trial," was the retort. "I fancy that I could tell the honorable court some interesting things. But that is precisely what you do not want me to do. Oh, don't think that I do not know it. It would be a fine hearing, would it not, for me to tell the court so that the papers would get it, that I, Count Herbert of Linmark, could retire to my estates in Cretonia, and there defy all the armies of your kingdom? But that is what I did; and you, puny king that you are, had to send a gipsy woman to bewitch me and this ruffian here to drug me, in order to make me captive. Why don't you have me murdered at once, as you intend to do in the end, and have done with it?"

"I have come," replied the king with calmness, "to ascertain if there was not some other course to be followed."

"No. There is none. I have wondered where I was confined; but now I understand. I am in one of the dungeons that your grandfather made such foul use of, once upon a time. I will not be the first victim who has been foully murdered in this place."

"Silence, sir!"

"For why? Nay, nay. You are a king, perhaps, but you do not rule me."

Patsy thought it was time for him to interrupt.

"Count Herbert of Linmark seems to remember Tricio, the gipsy," he said, smiling.

"Aye; if I were free to reach you, you would precious soon find out that I remember you. Curse you! Curse you! I suppose you are to be my executioner.

Or have you both come here to make an end of me together?"

"You know better than that when you ask the question," replied Patsy quickly. "We have come here to make terms—if you will make them."

"Terms? What terms?"

"Would you care to hear them?"

"Yes. Say on—if you are spokesman."

CHAPTER III.

THE PRISONER'S DEFIANCE AND HIS THREAT.

Patsy glanced toward the king, who nodded that he was to go ahead, signifying thereby that he was prepared to endorse any terms that the young detective might make with the prisoner; but before the pseudo gipsy could speak Count Herbert interrupted.

"Before you proceed, Tricio," he said, "I would like to know who you really are, and also by what authority you address me regarding terms."

"Have you any reason to believe that I am not what I appear to be?" replied Patsy.

"No. You may be all that you appear to be; but you may also be more than that."

"It does not matter who I am save that you know me as Tricio, the gipsy; and that I speak by the authority of his majesty, the king."

"Ah, indeed! Who are you besides being Tricio?"

"Merely a man like yourself, count."

"And what is your title?"

"I have none."

"You are lying to me."

"I am not. I am telling you the exact truth."

"Just as you told me the truth, I suppose, when at my castle in Cretonia, you professed to sell to me for gold the bride you had taken there with you. Or—was she a bride, and your wife, indeed? Or was she——"

"That will be about enough from you, Count Herbert, on that subject. I may not strike you, or even slap your face, because you are in chains; but I can and will horsewhip you till you beg for mercy if you take advantage of your present position to insult wantonly any woman I know. So, I warn you to be careful."

The different expressions of rage that chased themselves across the features of the count while Patsy was speaking would be difficult to describe.

He was silent for a moment after that, and then with an abrupt return to the previous question, he demanded again:

"Who are you?"

"Tricio, as I have told you."

"But who else, and what else?"

"Come, count, we waste time. His majesty and I are here to offer you terms by which you may be liberated, and permitted to appear again in the streets of Breslin."

"I am ready to hear them."

"You will be set at liberty and be given the limits of the city of Breslin, provided you will appear before a group of gentlemen composed of the chancellor of the kingdom, his eminence, the cardinal, the ministers of war and marine, and also his majesty, the king, and will there take oath solemnly, and also promise on your word of honor to each of the gentlemen named, that for the period of twelve months from the time of taking the oath, you will not go beyond the limits of the city of Breslin without the written permission of the king, given to you under the royal seal; and that during that time you will not conspire with any person or persons against the peace of this kingdom, or to the end of the withdrawal from it of Cretonia or any part thereof."

The king nodded his head emphatically when he heard this. He approved entirely, and a smile broke over his face as he nodded again.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed the count. "You may be a gipsy; doubtless you are; but you were cut out for a statesman, and are worthy to become a chancellor."

"You have heard the proposition," said Patsy coldly. "What have you to say to it?"

"Do you mean that you would take my word for it?" demanded the count.

"Neither his majesty nor I regard you, sir, as lost to your sense of honor where you have made oath and promised in the name that your father bore so nobly to adhere to a given line of duty."

"You read me better than I supposed you could," said the count, with a sneer.

"I believe that to whatever depths you may have fallen, you would not lightly tarnish the name and the honor that your grandfather left to you."

"Well, you may spare the useless expenditure of further breath on the subject. I will not take the oath—nor make the promise."

"You prefer to remain here in chains?"

"Yes."

"Indefinitely?"

"Oh, the time may not prove to be so indefinite as you now suppose, my gipsy friend," the count drawled out slowly, with an insolent smile. "I am not without friends in this city. I am not without powerful friends. I have no doubt that already I have been missed, and that inquiries are being made for me. I believe, in fact, that it is to that very condition that I owe this present visit from the king. I can wait."

"You seem to be well assured."

"I am. I know that the king will not have me murdered. He has not the courage—nor perhaps the will. You have just now referred to my father. It is his memory that stands between me and injury at the hands of the king."

"Do you positively refuse the terms we offer you?"

"Yes."

"Then——"

"Wait a moment, if you please."

"Well."

"I have a return proposition to submit to you, Tricio."

"To me? To his majesty, the king, rather."

"No; to you. The king will accept, if you will."

"Make it, then."

"It touches upon a subject that may anger you; but I do not refer to it for that purpose; I make it as a bona fide proposition."

"Speak on," said the king, when Patsy was silent because he knew what was coming. "What is it?"

With studied insolence the count turned his head toward the king and replied slowly:

"My proposition is to this gipsy who calls himself Tricio. When he tells me that he will listen to it, I will continue; not before."

"I would suggest, count," said Patsy quietly, but with deep meaning in his voice, "that in making the proposition you have in mind, you do not forget my late suggestion about the horsewhip, for I shall not hesitate to use it."

The count shrugged his shoulders. Then he turned again toward the king and addressed his words to him.

"This man who calls himself the Gipsy Tricio," he said, "came to my castle in Cretonia, and he took there with him three other persons, all gipsies—or, at least, they professed to be such, and at the present moment I have no particular reason to doubt that profession."

"Well?" said the king. "What of it?"

"Those three were composed of a man named Fernand, and two women—girls, I should perhaps call them—named respectively, Arla and Zara. They were, or professed to be, in the order in which I have named them, the brides of the two men. Does your majesty follow me?"

"Continue."

"They were both beautiful, but one of them was more beautiful than a hasheesh dream. I will not deny that I fell madly in love with her—I refer to Arla."

"By Heaven, count!" began Patsy, but the king raised one hand and said:

"Permit him to continue, Tricio."

The count smiled his insolent smile, and continued:

"I know that the gipsy blood worships gold. I bargained with this man and offered him gold for the woman he called his wife. He accepted—or pretended to do so. We arrived at terms——"

"You lie, count, and you know it," interrupted Patsy; but the count went on as if he had not heard.

"It is true that Tricio was deceiving me all the while in order to get me firmly into the trap he had set for me. He played his part well, as did the others. I was deceived, and I was caught in the trap. Hence, I am here. Your majesty follows me?"

"Yes. Go on. Go on to the end, count."

"I fully expected at that time, to secede with Cretonia at my back, from your kingdom and your authority. I knew that in my mountains of Cretonia I could defy you to the end; that you and all your armies could not drive me out; that our troubles would be looked upon with complacency by the Powers, and that finally I would be recognized as the King of Cretonia, my ministers would be received at other courts, and that a new kingdom would arise."

"You planned far, sir."

"And I planned well. But that is past now. Suffice it to say that I offered this man, or rather, through this man, honorable marriage to the woman he calls his wife; I offered to make her queen of Cretonia——"

"And that when you were going to war with me because I had not given you another woman for wife," said the king sarcastically.

The count shrugged his shoulders again.

"That is beside the question," he said. "It was the offer that I then made. Now, I repeat it, in part, your majesty. If this gipsy will give up the woman he calls his wife, or if she is his wife, if he will permit her to separate from him so that she can marry me—an arrangement which your majesty and the cardinal can very readily bring about—and if she will consent to become my wife as soon as arrangements can be made for the event, then I will take any oath your majesty

pleases to demand, I will at once become the most loyal of your subjects, I will forswear forever all thought of conspiracy of any kind, and I will promise in the name of my respected father, whom all men honored——"

"It is quite enough," said the king, interrupting him suddenly and passionately. "Come, my Tricio, we need not listen to any more. The man is even more loathsome than I supposed. Come. We will go."

"Is that my answer?" demanded the count.

Neither the king nor Patsy answered him. They did not look toward him again, but turned their backs and moved toward the iron door.

"Is that my answer?" the count called out to them again.

Still there was no reply; and the count, as they reached the threshold, burst into a loud, discordant laugh; and he cried out after it:

"Go, then, but know that you have not done with me yet. Know that although I am here, chained to the wall like a felon, I still have power, as you shall find to your cost. Know that although my hands are tied, you shall nevertheless feel their weight. Know, further, both of you, that while I live, I will pursue that girl to the ends of the earth until I find her, and make her my wife."

The door clanged shut behind the retreating forms of the king and Patsy, and left the prisoner alone again in his cell; but they could hear his discordant laughter as they made their way along the corridor.

"Patrick," said the king—it was the first time his majesty had ever addressed Patsy by his given name—"I don't know how you kept your hands off him."

"I don't either," replied Patsy, "unless it was the chains."

CHAPTER IV.

COUNT HERBERT DOES SOME PLOTTING.

At the earnest solicitation of the king Patsy agreed to defer his departure from Breslin for another week, for the problem of what was to be done with Count Herbert had now assumed larger proportions than ever.

His friends in and about the city were becoming insistent to know what had become of him, and the king realized that an underground effort was being made to find out.

He knew that it could not be long before the information would leak out among them that the count was imprisoned and in chains in a dungeon under the palace, and that then there would be demands made, which he could not ignore, that the count be at once brought to trial for whatever crime he had committed.

In this dilemma he appealed again to Patsy, the second day after their visit to the dungeon; but Patsy only shook his head and replied:

"I don't know, your majesty. It is something upon which I have not the experience to advise you."

"I have thought of sending him to sea on a man-of-war," said the king tentatively.

"In what capacity, your majesty?" asked Patsy.

"There could be but one."

"What is that? I confess my total ignorance regarding your ways of doing things in empires and kingdoms."

"He would go as he is now—a prisoner; the king's prisoner."

"In irons, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"What would be the advantage to you, sir?"

"He would be out of the way; out of the country; where his friends could not find him."

"Still, I don't see the advantage. What would you do with him when you got him on the ocean?"

"Keep him there."

"Indefinitely?"

"If necessary; for a year or more, anyhow."

"It would make him rather an expensive prisoner, would it not?"

"Yes; but not so expensive as he might otherwise prove to be."

"I grant you that."

"He would be in charge of a captain and a picked crew whom I would personally select. I would send them to cruise in the East—to China, Japan; anywhere."

"Is the scheme practicable?"

"It is the only one that appears so to me now."

"Then I am to assume that your majesty has already decided upon it?"

"Yes."

"But I read in your expression that you have still something on your mind that you wish to communicate to me, sir."

"Yes. I have wondered if I could not persuade you to take passage in the same cruiser, to America. I could direct that you be taken directly to New York, and——"

"No, your majesty. I must decline. Surely you

would not wish it, and it would be unnecessary anyhow. No, your majesty; no."

The king sighed deeply.

"I have made all the arrangements for transferring the prisoner aboard the cruiser to-morrow," he said.

"So soon?"

"Yes; everything is in readiness."

"Your majesty has lost no time."

"No. Something had to be done at once. To-morrow morning before daylight the count will be taken from his dungeon, conveyed to the railway-station, and from there taken to Briel, where he will be put aboard the cruiser. Patrick, will you once more assume your disguise as the gipsy, and act as special guard over him? Will you conduct him there for me, my friend?"

"Is it necessary?"

"Yes. I don't wish to trust too many with my secret. I have thought that if you and Fritz Hensau would reassume your characters as the gipsies, it could be done better than in any other way."

"Oh, well, if your majesty wishes it—yes. I will act."

"Thank you."

"I must know how you wish it to be done, sir."

"The particulars of the trip I will leave to you and Fritz. There will be a motor and one car to take you to Briel. You must paint the count's face, or so disguise him that he will not be recognized even if he is seen; and he must be made not to talk."

"That can only be accomplished in one way, sir."

"Yes, I know. The last meal that will be given to him to-night will be drugged. I have made arrangements for that. He will sleep late. He will give you no trouble, and when he awakes, it will be aboard the *Torenz*."

"What hour have you fixed for the departure from the palace?"

"Half-past three in the morning; when the city is sleeping as soundly as it ever does."

"Fritz is thoroughly informed about it, I suppose?"

"Yes. He will meet you here, ready disguised for the trip—at three o'clock."

When Patsy returned to the hotel he told Adelina all about what had been arranged, and what he had to do with it, and he closed by saying:

"I am really glad that something is to be done about it, for, to tell the truth, I am beginning to get tired of Breslin. Twenty-four hours after the count is disposed of, we will take our departure, sweetheart."

But it was fated that they should not do so, nevertheless.

Already the powerful friends of the count were at work.

That underground source of information which is never traceable, had secured the information for them they had sought, and even while the king and Patsy were consulting together about getting the count out of his dungeon and aboard the man-of-war, others had their heads together, also.

It will be remembered that Patsy had once asked the king how that particular dungeon in which the count was confined was ventilated, and that the reply had informed Patsy about a stand-pipe that extended to the roof of the palace.

It is proverbial that prisoners are always ingenious, the very necessities of their condition renders them so; and their powers of concentration are multiplied tenfold by reason of the imprisonment.

Count Herbert had lived in the palace several years. He had, since he was a boy, been attached to the personal staff of the king, and he knew every nook and corner of the huge building, as well as most of its secrets.

He was as familiar with the stand-pipe as anybody, and by careful planning he at last figured out a method by which, through its use, he could communicate with the outside world.

It was true that he had to run a great risk of having his communication fall into the wrong hands, but that was a chance that had to be taken; and he took it.

The king had given directions to those who were responsible for the prisoner, that he be given everything in reason that he asked for, so long as he was kept chained to the wall, and there was no chance of his escaping.

Suicide was not feared for him; indeed the king would have been overjoyed if the count had killed himself, for that would have been an easy solution of all the problems.

The prisoner asked for a lamp; it was supplied him.

He called for books to read; they were taken to him.

He asked for pictures to paste on the walls of his dungeon, as far as his chains would let him reach; they were brought.

Then one day he said to his jailer:

"I have nothing with which to amuse myself. I am tired of books, of pictures; tired of everything."

"Then tell me what I shall bring to you?" replied

the jailer. "My orders are to supply you with anything you ask for, so long as you do not call for files, or weapons—or the key to your dungeon."

"Listen," said the count. "One day not long ago, when I was free and walking in the streets of Breslin, I saw a man who was selling toy balloons to the children. Have you seen such a man about?"

"Yes," replied the jailer.

"I have a fancy to amuse myself as a child would do it. Do you see any objection to that, my good friend?"

"None whatever, count—if it pleases you."

"And I was always kind to you, was I not, when I was in authority here in the palace?"

"Yes."

"I would not like to have it known that I had fallen to that state of mind, during my imprisonment, where childish things amused me; you understand that?"

"I think I do, sir."

"And, moreover, I have gold in my pocket, all of which you shall have if you will find that man who sells the toy balloons and bring me a half-dozen of them—or as many as you can. A dozen would be better. I could have amazing fun with them. Indeed I could."

The jailer regarded the count curiously. He really believed that the confinement was affecting his mind. He had no desire at that moment other than to do anything in reason to humor him.

"But toy balloons are bulky things," he said. "They would be seen when I brought them to you, Count Herbert."

"Ah; you can bring one at a time. Go, when you are outside after your watch is over, and buy all you can secure, and then smuggle them to me, as you can. Will you do it?"

"Yes."

"And will you keep my harmless secret?"

"Yes; if I can."

"You must. I do not wish to be laughed at. It is bad enough to be tied up, or rather, chained up, here. Will you do it?"

"Yes."

And so the balloons were brought, one or two at a time until the count was possessed of a dozen of them.

After that it was an easy matter to tear flyleaves from the books that had been supplied him; to write notes with a pencil that had been furnished for marginal notes; to tear threads from the bindings of the books and to use them to tie the notes to the balloons, which were then sent up, one by one, through the stand-pipe, to float wheresoever they would, and finally to lose their buoyancy, as they were bound to do, and to settle down upon one spot or another somewhere near the city, or within it.

All that part of the attempt had to be left to chance, of course.

But in those written notes the count had described exactly where he was confined and how the dungeon might be reached; he told about the guard over him, and gave full directions for a rescue-party to follow.

And it happened that the twelfth balloon had been sent up through the stand-pipe the morning of the day when the interview just recorded between the king and Patsy occurred.

CHAPTER V.

THE PRISONER VANISHES.

It was ten minutes past three o'clock in the morning of the day following that interview between Patsy and the king when the young detective and Fritz Hensau—both of whom were disguised as the gipsies Tricio and Fernand—accompanied by three members of the Palace Guard, of which Colonel Hensau was the commander, took their departure from the private smoking-room of the king, and made their way slowly and cautiously toward the lower depths of the palace where was located the dungeon of Count Herbert's confinement.

The king had remained up with them until the time for their departure; then he had bidden them good night, with the added injunction to be extremely cautious in what they were about to do for him.

"The couht's food was carefully and expertly drugged last evening," he told them. "There is no doubt that he is sleeping soundly by now, and that he cannot be readily awakened. You have only to paint his features a little, and to put this wig on his head, to disguise him sufficiently for your purposes. He will not awaken till you have him safely aboard the *Torenz*—the cruiser at Briel."

They made their way toward the dungeons by the back staircases, and presently entered upon that section of the palace where the corridors led to the particular dungeon which was two stories below ground.

To approach it they had to pass through a grated door where the guard remained on duty, and this, to their astonishment, they found in total darkness, and the grated door wide ajar.

Peering through by aid of the light he carried,

Patsy discovered the guard, seated in the heavy arm-chair provided for him.

The man was gagged, and firmly bound to the chair, with his feet tied to the legs of it, and his hands to the wooden arms.

But his eyes were open, and he was conscious, and they were not long in releasing him and standing him upon his feet.

Patsy felt that he knew already what had happened.

He read in the plight of the guard the fact that the friends of the count had been busy, and had at last forced their way into the dungeons of the palace, where, doubtless, they had suspected the count was confined, even if they had not been informed of it.

"You have lost your prisoner?" he demanded, as soon as the guard was freed, and able to speak.

"Yes," was the half-surly reply; "and, through no fault of mine, believe me."

"We will determine that when we have heard what you have to say," replied Patsy. "Tell us what has happened."

"The men came here to the grating of the door——"

"What men?"

"One whom I mistook for you, sir, for he was a gipsy like yourself and this gentleman who is with you. I see my mistake now, sir, but I certainly believed, when he appeared there at the grating, that it was yourself."

"Go on. What then?"

"There were two others behind him, but I could not see their faces in the dim light. He alone came close to the grating and ordered me to admit them, in the name of the king. I had no thought of refusing. I was frightened, too."

"What frightened you?"

"I thought it was to be a midnight execution."

"You thought the prisoner was to be murdered?"

"That is a hard word, sir; but that is what I thought."

"Has such a thing ever been done here?"

"Not in the reign of the present king, sir; but before that—more than once."

"Go on, then. You opened the door and admitted them. What then?"

"Why, as soon as they came inside, one of them knocked me on the head. It stunned me, and by the time I got my wits together again, I was trieed up as you found me, and without the power to move or make a sound that could be heard fifty feet away."

"What then?"

"The three laughed at me, and——"

"Wait a moment. Did you recognize any of them? Do you know who they really were?"

"I did not. I do not. Two of them were masked and cloaked; the other, as I have said, was made to look as much like yourself as possible, and he wore a costume exactly like the one you have on."

"Well, what then?"

"They left me where you found me when you came, first going through my pockets and securing the key to the dungeon. Presently they returned carrying Count Herbert between——"

"Carrying him?"

"Yes, sir. He was unconscious. He looked as if he had been drugged, or something."

"True. I forgot. Proceed."

"That is all, sir, except that one of the men stooped and whispered in my ear, as he passed:

"'You may tell his majesty, the king, that if the count does not waken from the sleep into which he has fallen, his majesty's own life shall pay the forfeit.'

"It frightened me, sir. I have been thinking about it ever since."

"The count will awaken, all right, so you need give yourself no uneasiness on that point."

"Then they carried him outside, and went away. That is all I know."

"Remain here where you are until we have visited the dungeon," ordered Patsy; and then motioning to his companions to follow him he led the way onward through the corridor.

They found the door of the dungeon wide ajar; the lamp inside still burning; a collapsed toy balloon with a bit of white paper tied to it was on the floor of the room, directly underneath the mouth of the ventilating tube.

It was evidently the last one that the count had made use of, and had not succeeded in making its way out of the pipe at the top; and afterward it had gradually settled down until it had dropped again into the room where the prisoner waited.

But he had been drugged by the king's order, and he had doubtless fallen asleep before he discovered it; or else he had not cared about it.

He had been in a stupor when his rescuers arrived, but that had not deterred them from taking him away to freedom, evidently.

From the remark that one of them made to the guards he passed, it was evident that they feared that

the count had been poisoned; not drugged; but Patsy knew better than that.

He read the note that was tied to the collapsed balloon.

"From Count Herbert of Linmark, to any man who is or will be a friend of his in dire necessity," it began. "I am a prisoner, chained to the wall, in Dungeon D of the Third Corridor, second tier down, of the Royal Palace, the entrance to which is obtained by passage through the old guard-room formerly used for deserters. I am to be sacrificed—murdered, I have no doubt, to satisfy those who have plotted against me. If I were liberated I could soon make my peace with the king and the court. If this falls into the hands of one who will assist, let him or her go at once to Molok, at 4 Blitzenstrasse, and acquaint him with my predicament, Molok will know what to do, and he will find others to assist him. To him or her who conveys this message in secrecy, my eternal gratitude, and also a fortune in gold if it be acceptable. And I pray you, lose no time, for my death awaits just outside the door of my dungeon.

"HERBERT, COUNT VON LINMARK."

"I call that a masterpiece of composition, under the circumstances," said Patsy, with admiration.

"I think we should decide at once what is to be done," said Fritz. "The king will be wild when he knows about this."

"He must not know about it—at present," replied Patsy.

"How is it to be kept from his majesty? And what good will it do, if it is?" asked Fritz.

"One question at a time, please. For the present we will keep the secret; and the guards or jailers—— How many are there of them, Fritz?"

"Three. Eight hours on and twelve off."

"They are all your men?"

"Yes."

"They must be bound to secrecy for the present. The king must not know of this."

"How can it be kept from him?"

"I don't know. We will try, at least. If it were not for the captain and crew of the man-of-war that is waiting for the count, it would be easy. But Fritz, you must take that train to Briel and advise with the captain of the cruiser."

"I can try it; but what do you accomplish by keeping the king in ignorance of the facts, Patsy?"

"We spare his majesty the mental anxiety which the knowledge would cause him; and we give ourselves the time to do as we think best about recapturing the prisoner. For you agree with me, do you not, that he must be taken again?"

"Yes."

"Can you venture a guess, Fritz, as to whom Molok—the man to whom the duplicate of this letter was taken—can you venture a guess to whom he would apply for assistance in this matter? It was a courageous thing to do, to venture into the palace of the king, on an expedition of that sort."

"That is true."

"Can you make the guess I have asked?"

"It would be only a guess."

"Well?"

"There were three men who came here to take the count away."

"Yes."

"There are three rich and rather powerful Cretorians living in Breslin at the present time, and they are, in their way, as great daredevils as the count himself."

"Then I think your guess is a good one. Who are they? What are their names?"

"Eitel Zollern, Paul Morgenthal, and Baron Hatzfeld."

"It is safe to assume, then, that those men are the ones who were here about midnight, and who took the count out of his dungeon. Now, answer me quickly: How many men of your guard in whose discretion you can implicitly trust, can you raise up within the next fifteen minutes, Fritz?"

"As many as you require."

"Then hurry away and get me ten more than we have here. Send one of them to Briel with directions that the cruiser is to wait where she is till to-morrow night, or morning. Then, with the men, meet me as quickly as possible in front of the house where Hatzfeld lives. I happen to know where it is. Hurry."

"What are you going to do, Patsy?"

"I am going to enter Hatzfeld's house, by force, if necessary, and search it. After that, if we find nothing, we will go to the other two. That drugging of the count is going to be of great assistance to us, Fritz."

"Why so?"

"Because they have got to awaken him before they can discover his wishes, and they will take him to one of their homes, in order to do that."

"Possibly."

"And if the count had not been drugged, he would already be on the road to Cretonia; and once he gets there—well, you know what is likely to happen then."

CHAPTER VI.

A FIGHT ON A SPEEDING LOCOMOTIVE.

Half an hour later Fritz Hensau was pounding at the door of the residence of Baron Hatzfeld. He had thrown aside his disguise as a gipsy and was again dressed in the uniform of colonel of the Palace Guard; but Patsy retained the outward appearance of Tricio, the gipsy.

It was not yet four o'clock in the morning, and those inside the house were slow to answer, but at last there was a response; to which Fritz made answer:

"Open in the name of the king."

"Who is it who demands entrance here at this hour?" came the reply from the opposite side of the door.

"Colonel Hensau, of the Palace Guard, and in the name of his majesty, the king."

The door flew open at once, and a footman stood in the entrance, while the baron, evidently just out of bed, could be seen on the stairway behind him.

It was the baron who called out to them:

"What is the meaning of this summons? Is the king ill?"

Fritz did not know what to say in reply. He was really acting without the authority of the king, and he knew that the baron was a man who would go straight to his majesty and complain of any outrage, if he imagined there was one.

But Patsy stepped forward and answered for him.

"Baron Hatzfeld," he said, "we crave your pardon for disturbing you. The fact is we are in search of an escaped prisoner who was seen to climb the fence into your garden and who is even now doubtless concealed somewhere about your premises. He is a dangerous man, and we must search your house and grounds for him."

"And who are you, sir, that takes the words out of the mouth of Colonel Hensau?" demanded the baron haughtily.

"I am one in authority, as the colonel will inform you, baron;" and then without waiting for permission, he turned to the men and added: "Search, and search thoroughly."

"You shall do nothing of the kind," said the baron.

"Search!" ordered Patsy grimly. "If the baron opposes you, you will know how to act."

"Colonel Hensau," shouted the baron, "I appeal to you, sir."

"Baron," said Patsy, addressing him again, "you will take cold if you remain there in your present costume. Permit me to suggest that you retire to your room and consider yourself a prisoner until after the search is made."

"By the gods, sir, you are a gipsy, and you dare to order *me* about, as if——"

"Take the baron to his room," ordered Patsy to the men. "If he refuses to be quiet, gag him and bind him."

But the baron did not wait for that added indignity to be committed; he turned and made all haste up the stairs toward his room.

As soon as he had disappeared, Fritz, who was white with anxiety over what they were doing, whispered to Patsy:

"He will raise the very devil of a row about this, if we don't happen to find our prisoner, Patsy."

"I don't think so."

"But he will. And, besides, don't you see that it will spoil all the secrecy you have thought to preserve about the count's escape?"

"No. After what you have said about it and after what I have seen of the baron, I have not the slightest doubt that he was one of the three men who liberated the count."

"Well?"

"We will only force him to show his hand. He does not doubt, if he *is* one of those men, that we are here by order of the king, for he would jump at the conclusion that the king has already discovered in some manner, that he, the baron, was at the palace to-night—or rather, last night."

"What of that?"

"Don't you see that he will not *dare* go to the king? And that he will lose no time in making his escape from Breslin and going to Cretonia?"

"You don't want him to do that, do you?"

"No. And he shall not do it."

"What is to be done with him, then?"

"He must be given the apartment that Count Herbert lately vacated; that is, if I am to conduct this affair."

"Take—the baron—to the *dungeon?*"

"Precisely."

"Good Heavens!"

"Fritz, listen to me a moment."

"Yes."

"I am satisfied already that the count is not here in this house. I believe that he is even now on his way to Cretonia in charge of the other two men who effected the rescue."

"You do?"

"And that the baron has been left behind to use his power and influence for furthering the schemes of that party. I think when we visit the house of Eitel Zollern and Paul Morgenthal we will find that they are not there, because they will have gone away with the count. You may depend upon it that the whole responsibility of the affair, so far as Breslin is concerned, has been left in the hands of the baron."

"That is reasonable, if the rest of it is correct."

"Sure. The baron has relied upon his standing here in Breslin to protect him; even to keep the breath of suspicion away from him. But if we take him to the dungeon where the count was confined, he will not be able to do what he has been told to do, and the count's first efforts will therefore, in a measure become crippled. We must take the road in pursuit of the others, as soon as possible."

"But now, right now, what shall we do now?"

"Come with me. Call off your men from the search. Order three of them to follow us."

Patsy led the way up the stairs, and presently knocked at the baron's door, which was fastened on the inside.

There was no reply, and Patsy, without knocking a second time, directed the men to fall upon it and burst it in.

They did so at once, but only to discover that the room was empty; that is, the baron was not there, and a little further investigation presently revealed the fact that he had left the house entirely.

He had gone out, doubtless half-dressed as he was, by a side entrance, and had disappeared.

There were wheel-tracks at the curb, where they could be seen upon the dampness that the dew had caused upon the pavement, and, although they were already disappearing, Patsy knew that they were recent.

"Fritz," he said, "I was partly wrong in my surmises. The baron was making ready to leave the house at the very moment we appeared here. He was in the act of changing his clothes for the journey he was to take. The bed has not been slept in, and here is every evidence of hasty packing. I was wrong about his being left here as an agent for their purposes."

"Well, anyhow," said Fritz, "he cannot be far ahead of us."

"No."

"What shall we do, Patsy? What shall we do? You have taken the direction of affairs; give your orders. My men shall obey them."

"You and your men take the road to Cretonia without a moment's delay, and ride like blazes. Ride for your reputation, and for the safety of the king."

"What will you do?"

"I am going after that special engine and car, at the station, if your man has not already gotten away with it."

The young detective did not wait for a further remark, but dashed out of the house on a run, leaped upon a horse, and calling to one of the men to follow him, rode away at a gallop toward the station.

Already it had occurred to him that in some manner the conspirators might have learned of the presence of the special at the station, and that they might have had the temerity to make use of it.

It was exactly what Patsy would have done himself under like circumstances, and therefore he thought that others might do the same.

That he was not mistaken in his opinion, was presently only too well proved to him.

As he rode across the wide plaza in front of the station, he could see the locomotive and car already in motion; and as he spurred his horse forward, the engine gathered headway and shot out from the station upon the main track.

Patsy shouted and waved his hands, hoping that the engineer would see him and obey the gesture to stop; but he did not, and the special sped on, gathering headway with each revolution of the wheels, presently rounding a curve and dashing away out of sight.

But there was another engine there, too.

It was one that had been ordered for a trailer for the special, just as there had doubtless been another for a pilot.

Patsy leaped from his horse to the ground just as it began to move, and running forward, gesticulating frantically, he managed to spring upon the step in time.

But as he did so, the fireman—it was the left side of the engine that Patsy boarded so hastily—stepped menacingly toward him, and brandished a wrench in his hand, ordering the young detective to get off at once.

But Patsy was already on the footboard of the cab and he reached forward and grasped the fireman's wrist, turned it, and so forced him to drop the wrench.

"You fool!" he exclaimed. "I am in the service of the king. You must obey me."

"There are too many in the 'service of the king' tonight. The king doesn't use gipsies for special messengers."

What Patsy would have said in reply to that statement will not be known, for at that instant the driver, who had stepped down from his perch for a moment, aimed a blow with his fist at Patsy's head, which the latter sensed rather than saw, just in time to avoid it.

There was nothing for him to do then but to fight back.

It was a precarious place for a conflict, on the trembling engine, between the cab and the tender; but it had to be undertaken.

Without regard to the rules of fighting—he could not stop to observe them just then, for there was altogether too much at stake—Patsy raised his right knee sharply and suddenly, and so caught the fireman who was advancing to a second attack exactly in the pit of the stomach, and he fell in a heap on the floor of the cab groaning, just as the engineer, in utter silence, delivered another fierce blow.

Patsy ducked, and it passed over his head.

Then he sent an uppercut, with all his strength, at the engineer's jugular and a left-hand jolt into the pit of his stomach, with the result that the engineer also collapsed upon the floor, and laid there moaning.

Patsy took just one instant in which to glance out ahead of them along the track.

He saw that the locomotive was flying along at frightful speed, and unless he speedily got to the throttle there would be a rear-end collision with the engine and car that were on the track ahead of them.

Nevertheless, he took the time to snap the two pairs of handcuffs he had taken with him that night for use on the count, upon the ankles of the two men.

Then he leaped into the engineer's seat and laid his hand upon the throttle.

CHAPTER VII.

IN PURSUIT OF THE SPECIAL.

Patsy reached the throttle only just in time.

In another moment they would have been piled on top of the special, and the entire outfit would have been smashed into kindling-wood and scrap iron.

As it was, before he checked the speed the pilot of the engine was close against the rear end of the car ahead, with only a few inches separating them.

And then Patsy considered a grim question in his mind.

He wondered if it would not be a good thing to risk the loss of a life or two in winning the race he had undertaken.

He realized that the engine he was on was the better one of the two, and that he could easily run it against that other car and smash it if he would.

But there was the chance that they would all go to kingdom come together, and he hardly felt at liberty to take it.

Besides, he told himself, that he did not know whether Count Herbert was on that car or not. In fact, the probability was that he was not; that he had gone from the city on horseback and that the only passenger was doubtless the baron whom they had lately scared away from his home.

While he was considering all that, he happened to look behind him, and just in time, for the engineer and fireman had risen together, and were advancing toward him with murder in their faces and heavy wrenches in their hands.

He had to leave the throttle for a time to give his attention to them; and he did it by quietly drawing a pistol from his pocket and aiming it toward them.

"Get back there in the coal and sit down!" he ordered; and perceiving that he had them at his mercy, the two sullenly obeyed.

Then Patsy passed around to the other side, found the shovel, and threw coal into the furnace.

Perceiving then that the engine was about holding its own with the special ahead, he addressed the engineer.

"If you two will listen to a little reason, now, I will talk to you," he said. "Do you believe that you are prepared to do that?"

"Who are you?" demanded the engineer, in reply.

"I am what you heard me tell the fireman I was. I am on special service for his majesty, the king."

"Prove it."

"Unfortunately, I cannot. Colonel Hensau has the order that was to be delivered to the conductor in charge of the special."

"Well, you are not Colonel Hensau; you are a gipsy."

"Never mind that. Is Baron Hatzfeld aboard the special?"

"Yes."

"Who else is there with him?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure about that, or are you only lying to me?"

"Anyhow, I won't tell you."

"Do you know where the special was to go, on this trip?"

"Yes."

"To Briel, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll wager, then, that before Hatzfeld climbed aboard the car he changed the destination. I will wager, also, that he directed the engineer to take the branch road that leads to Cozovanna, in Cretonia. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"So you see I know what I am talking about, don't you?" asked Patsy, again putting a few shovelfuls of coal in the furnace, and stepping forward a moment to open the throttle a bit wider.

"You appear to know it; yes."

"Now, Mr. Engineer, I want to tell you and the fireman something, and it is the last argument I shall use with you. If you do not obey me after that, you must take the consequences. If you do, I will guarantee that both of you will receive promotion for this morning's work. Are you ready for the question?"

"Yes," said the engineer, answering for both of them.

"I am on service for the king; special service. There has been treason in Breslin, and the men now on that car are some of the traitors. If you aid them in the escape they are making you will be guilty with them, and death is the penalty for treason. Wait, listen until I have finished; then reply."

"Yes, sir;" there was more respect in the engineer's tones now.

"That special was ordered for Briel—the seaport. It was intended to convey thither a certain prisoner who has been confined in the palace for some time. That prisoner was to be in charge of Colonel Hensau with five of his men, and myself.

"The prisoner escaped just before we went after him to take him to the special. He was assisted in that escape by Baron Hatzfeld, Herr Zollern, and Herr Morgenthal. If you ever utter a word of what I am telling you, you will find yourselves also in a dungeon, and in danger of your lives. Do you understand that?"

"Yes."

"The prisoner—I don't know whether you are Cretonians, either of you, in fact, or not; but it makes no difference."

"We are not; either of us."

"That prisoner to whom I have referred was Count Herbert von Linmark."

The fireman and the engineer looked toward each other in astonishment, and Patsy continued:

"Naturally they would wish to escape to Cretonia. Cozovanna is the largest city of Cretonia, the nearest railway-station to Castle Linmark, and therefore would be the objective point of the fugitives. Hatzfeld somehow found out about the special and he made use of his name and influence to represent to the conductor that the king had changed his intention about the special. That is doubtless how he succeeded in stealing it.

"Now, my men, you have heard the story. If you will act under my orders, you will be rewarded. If you refuse to do so, you will become traitors to your king as those men have done, and you will suffer with them. What do you say?"

"Will you swear, sir, that you are telling us the truth?" asked the engineer.

"I have already sworn it. I do so again."

"Then we will obey you. Release us."

"It is your turn to swear."

"We swear, sir; both of us."

Without another word the detective unlocked the shackles from their ankles, and told them to stand up.

"Get to your duties now, both of you, and obey me to the letter. If I discover any hesitancy on the part of either of you, I will shoot you."

"We understand the situation now, sir," replied the engineer.

After a silence that lasted several minutes Patsy approached close to the engineer, and said in his ear:

"Before the start was made was the despatcher given directions to clear the track toward Cozovanna?"

"Yes, sir, all the way there."

"Have we all got water and coal enough to take us there?"

"We have plenty of coal and we can scoop the water."

"You haven't told me yet who went upon that special besides Hatzfeld."

"The very men you named, sir; that was what convinced me."

"Zollern, Morgenthal, and Count Herbert?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who else?"

"Some servants. Four, I think there were; and a

man called Molok, who is in the service of Count Herbert."

"Yes; I know him. Then there are eight men aboard that train without counting the crew. How many are in the crew?"

"A conductor, a train-porter, and the men in the cab of the engine."

"This is the better engine of the two, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Is there a pilot ahead?"

"Yes, sir."

"Could you slow up at any station where there is a telegraph office, and still speed up enough afterward to catch that special again?"

"I think so."

"I don't want you to think; I want you to know."

"Yes, sir; it can be done."

"How soon will you pass such a station as I have named?"

"In about twenty minutes, sir."

"Slow up, then, when you are passing it. I will prepare a message to throw off, to be sent on ahead."

Patsy took a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote:

"In the Name of the King!

"To all officers and citizens of Cozovanna.

"Arrest and hold against all forces and objection, passengers and crew of the special locomotive and car now speeding toward your city, and which should arrive there in about two hours.

"Signed: FRITZ HENSAU,
"Colonel of the Palace Guard.
"By order of the king."

"It seems as if that ought to do the act," he told himself, and he folded it carefully and made ready to throw it from the cab when the engineer should slow up for him at the station that had been mentioned.

Presently they came in sight of it, and the engineer turned and asked him:

"Do you wish me to stop altogether, sir? I think I can do it and still overtake the others ahead of us."

"No; slow down; that will be sufficient."

Patsy wrapped his message around a gold piece, and tied it with a string; then as they dashed in at the station, he leaned far out of the cab, waving his hand and shouting to attract attention.

They slowed down to a speed of ten miles an hour, and as they came abreast of the platform he tossed the weighted message toward a uniformed man who stood there, and saw him catch it in his hands.

"All right," he cried out to the engineer. "Open her up. Go on. Catch the others now."

Again the throttle was opened wide, and the locomotive leaped forward into full speed again.

It was a dangerous thing to do, too, running at that rate on that particular section of track, for it was none of the best.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WRECK.

The time lost in slowing down was destined, however, to prove more disastrous to Patsy's plans than he could possibly have anticipated.

When a locomotive is running at the rate of almost seventy miles an hour, a great deal of distance is covered in a very few moments.

When another locomotive, that is chasing that one, slows down to ten miles an hour, there are minutes and distance lost in slackening and in regaining the maximum speed which cannot be correctly estimated here.

It was certain that when Patsy looked out ahead of them after throwing the message off at the station, the special train had disappeared around a bend in the road and they seemed for the moment to have the railway to themselves.

They were already within the borders of Cretonia, and had been for some time.

Patsy knew, for he had studied the map of that country very thoroughly, that while Cozovanna was the nearest railway-station to Castle Linmark, it was still fifty miles or more distant from it, and that high mountains had to be crossed in order to reach it from there.

He knew, moreover, that there were many points along the line of the road that were not only as near to the mountain where the castle was located, but from which the route to it would be even easier and better than from the city—that is, always provided that horses or other means of conveyance were at hand to utilize.

And now, that the special was out of sight for the moment, around the curve in the roadbed the idea occurred to him for the first time that possibly the fugitives might not be intending to enter Cozovanna at all.

It was not unlikely that they had foreseen, since the pursuit on the railway began, that a telegram might be sent ahead to stop them; and Patsy silently scolded

himself now because he had not sent the message to a nearer station with orders to flag the special and so force it to come to a halt.

He realized the fact, too, that the eight men in that car ahead would fight if they were driven into a corner where they would be obliged to do so in order to escape.

And he was only one against eight, if they were stopped before they arrived at the city. It is true that he felt that now he could rely upon the assistance of the two men who were in the cab with him, but they would not count for much, even at that.

"Either they have speeded up considerably or we are not making as good time as formerly," he remarked to the engineer presently.

"There is a steady grade here, sir. We are doing the best we can. They cannot do any better, or as well."

"How far ahead of us do you suppose they are now?"

"Eight or ten miles at the least, sir."

"Do you know anything about the mountains of Cretonia, engineer?"

"Only what I have been told, sir. I used to run on this division and I have heard a great deal about this part of the country. It is very wild, and so far as I know, the people are even wilder than their country."

"Do you know the location of Castle Linmark?"

"I know about where it is."

"What point on the railroad is probably nearest to it?"

"I don't know exactly, sir, but I should say that we are about as near to it now as we can get."

"Nearer now than we would be at Cozovanna?"

"Yes; about forty miles from the castle."

"Have you got this engine moving as fast as she will go?"

"Every bit; yes, sir."

"Hello! Look ahead. What is happening?"

They had come to a long stretch of straight track where for a distance of more than two miles there was not a suggestion of a curve.

At the extreme end of that straight reach of track they could see the special they had been chasing, and when Patsy first caught sight of it, it seemed to be standing still; but even as he called the attention of the engineer to it they could see that it started on again, and it speedily disappeared from view among some woods, where there was also a curve, so the engineer said.

"I wonder why they stopped?" murmured the detective, more to himself than to his companion.

"I was wondering about that myself, sir," he replied. "Just beyond that point where we saw them there is a down-grade, very abrupt and at the bottom of it there is a sharp curve. It is the worst place on the whole road."

"Well, speed up all you can until we reach the bad place on the grade. I don't want them to get so far ahead of us. I am almost sorry now that I bothered about that telegram."

But the locomotive was doing all it could, and they were not long in crossing those two miles between them and the woods; and they flew past the point where the special had appeared to be stopped and struck the down-grade that the engineer had mentioned, at the rate of a mile a minute.

Gradually, then, the man at the throttle closed it down, and set the air brakes ever so little so that the speed of the engine gradually slackened.

And then, suddenly, they came into full view of a horror they had not dreamed of.

They had heard no crash, and yet, there straight before them where the sharp curve at the bottom of the grade occurred, they both discovered at the same instant, the car and engine and tender of the special were piled in a blazing heap together.

Instantly the engineer of Patsy's locomotive shut off his steam and set the air brakes hard; but although the wheels ceased to revolve, the speed of the engine was so great that she still slid along the rails at a frightful rate of speed.

"Jump!" cried the engineer, thrusting one leg through the window of the cab. "It is your only chance. Jump!"

He did not wait to see if his advice was followed or not, but threw himself through the window of the cab to the ground where Patsy could see him roll over and over as he struck.

He saw, too, that the fireman had done the same, and he leaped back to the space between the cab and the tender and stood there clinging tightly and watching, resolved that he would not leap out until the very last instant.

He was cool, and he knew that the engine was stopping.

He believed there was a chance that the impact might not be so terrific after all, and he held on tightly and waited.

It was fortunate that he did so, for the engine he was on came up against the obstruction on the track

with a bump that would not have upset a pail of water.

In an instant Patsy was on the ground and running back toward the engineer and fireman.

The latter was motionless, stunned by a blow on his head which had rendered him senseless, but which apparently had not otherwise injured him.

But the engineer was sitting up straight, with an expression of pain on his face, and he smiled lugubriously as Patsy approached.

"My ankle is sprained, sir," he said, "so that I cannot put my foot to the ground; but it is not broken. How is my fireman?"

"He'll come around all right in a moment. He is only stunned," replied Patsy.

"Then, sir, will you be so kind as to go forward to the wreck and see if there is anybody under it who is alive?"

And Patsy did so; but, much to his astonishment, there was not a sign of a human being, dead or alive, anywhere near it, and after satisfying himself of the truth of that condition he returned to the engineer, and to the fireman, who was now sitting up and rubbing his head.

"There is no one there, dead or alive," he told the engineer; and the man smiled.

"Then I made a good guess," he said.

"A good guess? What do you mean? I haven't heard you make any guess."

"I did not mention it aloud, sir, at the time; but when we saw that train at the edge of the wood and thought it was standing still, I half-thought that they had abandoned it and then started it to run wild, with a full head of steam on, down this grade, expecting that it would be wrecked right here."

"But the crew of the train wouldn't consent to such a thing as that."

"The crew might have to do it, sir, at the muzzle of revolvers."

"By Jove, you are right!"

"If you and the fireman will assist me to my cab, sir, we will run back up the track to the top of the grade. I have an idea that we will find the train crew around there somewhere, sir."

"Dead?"

"No, sir, probably not; but bound and helpless, likely."

They were not long in getting the engineer into the cab, and then when the engine was started backward with the fireman at the throttle, Patsy bound up the injured ankle for the engineer; and by the time that was completed they had arrived at the point where they had first caught sight of the special.

As Patsy leaped to the ground he heard a shout from off somewhere in the woods, and going hastily toward it, he presently came in sight of a spectacle which under any other circumstances would have made him laugh.

Four men—the engineer, fireman, conductor, and train-porter of the special—were tied fast to trees, and they were swearing together in such unison that it was ludicrous.

He lost no time in releasing them, and in securing an explanation of the incident from the conductor.

The conductor told the story in his own way, and it took him a long time to do it; but stripped of all unnecessary words it was to the effect that the baron or the count, he could not remember which, had made him signal to the engineer to stop the train when it arrived at that spot, and then had compelled him to call the engineer back to the car.

They had all been made prisoners then, and while the count climbed aboard the engine of the special and opened the throttle, the others took them off into the woods and tied them to the trees.

"I knew there would be a wreck at the bottom of that grade," said the engineer of the special, "and we heard it when it happened. It's a shame to spoil a good engine like that."

"So it is," said Patsy. "And now it strikes me that you have all got your work cut out for you. One of you must skip back along the track to flag anything that approaches, and so on. You will know what to do without my telling you."

"Certainly we will."

"Does any one of you know this country around here?"

There was no reply to that.

"Which direction did those men take after they left you tied to the trees?" he asked of them then.

The conductor pointed with his finger, and said: "That way, sir."

"Well, you need not wait for me, or expect to see me again, until I get back to Breslin. But when you get back there, find Colonel Hensau and tell him where you left me, and all about what happened. Will you do that, conductor?"

"Yes, sir. I'll wire it to him if you like."

"All right. Do so."

CHAPTER IX.

A VERY MUCH ALIVE DEAD MAN.

Patsy had no difficulty in discovering the trail of the escaping party.

The ground was soft and many of the footprints were readily to be seen.

The trail took him diagonally through the forest, and he thought toward a house that he remembered to have seen from the engine as they approached the wood.

It must be said that Patsy never once thought of giving up the pursuit, although he was chasing eight men while he himself was now alone.

But he was well aware that at times there are advantages in being alone; and in the present case he was resolved at least not to give up the trail until he had followed the escaping men to their destination—and already he knew that place to be Castle Linmark.

Patsy knew all about Castle Linmark.

He had been there before, and he had inspected it from top to bottom, at the time he and Fritz and Adelina and Zita had gone there together, disguised as gipsies and had brought the count away a prisoner.*

He recalled now the things the king had told him about the old castle before he started out on that other expedition; secrets that he had then not been obliged to make use of, but which he now believed would be of great assistance to him.

To make sure that he had not forgotten he repeated them all over in his mind, one after another while he kept his eyes upon the trail he was following.

They were secrets that the king had learned when, as a boy, he paid a visit to the father of the present Count Von Linmark, and they had to do with the ancient history of the old castle.

They related to secret passages through the walls of the interior of the old pile; to a tunnel beneath the moat; to a secret chamber in one of the towers; to doors within the castle that, while appearing to be locked, could still be opened from without; and to many other matters of the same sort.

We all know something about the dogged determination of Patsy, once he was set upon accomplishing a thing, and now he looked ahead of him already to the time when he should come to the castle in pursuit of the count, and again make him a prisoner.

But would he?

Surely the odds seemed strongly against him.

Presently he came to a clearing and saw directly ahead of him the house he had referred to in his thoughts.

It was a farmhouse of the better class, surrounded by many other smaller houses in which lived the men who worked upon that particular estate.

Patsy waited at the edge of the wood while he inspected it thoroughly and carefully.

But he saw nothing which suggested that there would be danger in advancing, and after a little he did so, cautiously at first, and then rapidly, for he saw that he was discovered, and that a man was waiting near one of the doors, watching him as he approached.

As he continued to advance, he suddenly saw the man raise a gun to his shoulder, take deliberate aim at him, and fire.

With the instant that the puff of smoke came from the muzzle of the gun—a distance of more than a hundred yards separated them still—Patsy dropped flat upon the ground, permitting his form to relax in falling, in order to drop the quicker.

Whether the bullet was aimed correctly or not, it did not hit him; but neither did Patsy move.

He remained perfectly still where he had fallen, knowing that the man would not hesitate to shoot again if he thought his bullet had missed.

After a wait that seemed almost interminable, Patsy could hear the man approaching; but he remained perfectly motionless; and after a little the man came nearer, and Patsy heard him mutter in the language of the country:

"That is the very fellow Count Herbert told about. He said if I would kill the gipsy he would give me a thousand marks. Good! I have done it. I wonder if the fellow has got anything of value in his pockets?"

Again the man seemed to hesitate; but after a moment he approached so close that he stood directly over Patsy—and then he stooped to search his pockets.

That was the moment that Patsy had been waiting for.

As soon as the man's face was close enough down, Patsy's two hands shot upward and his fingers closed with a grip of steel upon the fellow's throat.

That grip shut off the wind, the powers of speech, the strength, and all the energy that the man possessed.

Patsy did not realize how hard he choked him until almost before he could have expected it the man became limp and senseless in his grasp, and a heavy weight upon his body.

*See Nick Carter Weekly 598.

Then Patsy raised his head cautiously and peered around him to see if there were other men with guns anywhere about.

But he could see nothing at all, save the houses and the stables. There was no other sign of human life anywhere near.

Satisfied at last that the short incident had not been observed, Patsy rose to his feet and looked down upon the senseless man he had choked so badly; then, realizing in the selfsame flash of thought that his present position was too exposed and that he might find this particular captive useful when he should return to his senses, he picked him up, threw him across his shoulder, and hurried with him toward the stables, which were nearer than the house.

Arrived there he speedily found some strong sheep twine with which he tied the prisoner; and then having fixed him so that he could not escape, he hurried swiftly but cautiously toward the house, and the door near which he had first discovered the man who would have shot him.

He kept his pistol ready for instant use as he approached and finally entered the house, but he saw no signs of life anywhere about.

Although he went entirely through the house, from room to room and searched it thoroughly, he found no other person; nor were there evidences of life about the other and smaller dwellings that surrounded it.

It was a mystery that he could not at the moment solve, and so after a while he returned to his prisoner in the stable, first, however, securing the gun that had been dropped where the short struggle occurred.

Consciousness was slowly returning to his captive, when he rejoined him, and Patsy slapped his face roughly to hasten it. He was in no mood for waiting.

The fellow had tried to murder him, too.

He was surprised, however, at the grin with which the man greeted him, as soon as his senses had returned; and still more astonished when the fellow muttered:

"A dead man! A dead man! That's what you are; a dead man!" And he repeated it over and over again and again to himself, as if there was something especially satisfactory about the sound of the sentence.

"I'm very much alive, as you will discover presently," said Patsy at last, in the language the man had made use of; and the reply was:

"Yes, yes. I know; but not for long. Not for long. You will soon be dead like the others. You have touched me and I have not yet entirely recovered. The contagion is here. You will catch it. Oh, yes, you will catch it. You're a dead man; a dead man. Yes, you are."

"Catch what?" asked Patsy, who began vaguely to understand.

"The disease. It will kill you. It will."

"What disease, man? What are you talking about?"

"The small-pox. Twelve have died with it here, and the others ran away before it got so bad. I am the only one left, and I couldn't die. I am getting well."

"So I see. The small-pox, eh?"

"Yes. You will catch it. You are a dead man."

"Not quite. Don't you fool yourself. I had it once, my friend and people do not have it twice. I am what is called an immune, so you see I will not catch it, and I am not a dead man, either."

"You have had it?"

"Yes."

"And recovered from it?"

"It looks that way, doesn't it?"

"You are the gipsy, aren't you?"

"Yes; the gipsy whom the count told you to kill, and for whose death he said he would pay you a thousand marks. You are a bad marksman, my man. What is your name?"

"Menelik."

"Where did the count and his friends go after they left here—and how did they go?"

"They took all my horses—four of them; and all my vehicles—three of them. Two horses with the two-seated wagons and one horse each to the one-seated wagons. That carried all of them, and they started for the castle."

"How far is it from here to the castle?"

"Thirty miles, as the crow flies; forty by the road."

"And it is now almost noon. They will not reach the castle to-night, will they?"

"Yes; with my horses they will; by midnight."

"Do you think so?"

"I know it."

"Have you got anything to eat in the house, Menelik?"

"Yes; plenty."

"Get upon your feet, then, and come along with me; and while you show me where the food is I want you to answer more questions;" and inside the house a little later, Patsy began again:

"Did the count pay you for your horses?"

"Yes; and besides that, he will send them back to me."

"Do you know where another horse could be procured, and a saddle, if they were paid for at twice their value?"

"Yes."

"A good horse?"

"The best of all I ever owned. The swiftest; the most tireless. Only I forgot. I will not sell him."

"Where is he?"

"In the pasture south of the house. Why?"

"How much is he worth?"

"A thousand marks. All of that."

"That is about two hundred dollars," thought Patsy, "and it is probably three times the value of the horse." Aloud he said: "Very well, I will give you a thousand marks, and I will go and take your horse. When I am through with him, I will turn him loose, and when you find him you can claim him for your own, for I shall never do so. Here is the money. How shall I catch the horse?"

"You can call him to you with a basin of oats."

"Good; and how long will it take him to carry me to Castle Linmark?"

"He can do it in six hours—easy."

"Forty miles, and up a mountain?"

"Yes, and easy. You have had the small-pox and got well; I like you."

"You're a queer chap, Menelik. All the same I think I'll take your gun along so you cannot take another snap-shot at me."

CHAPTER X.

A GALLANT HORSE AND SOME LUCK.

Do you know what the sensation is to have the feel of a strong, splendid horse under you? The sort of a horse that is proud of the fact that he is a horse? The kind of animal that possesses almost unlimited speed and endurance and that steps along with dainty strides, as if the earth were made purposely for his feet to tread upon?

That is the sort of horse Patsy bestrode when he left that farmhouse and started for the mountains on the opposite slope of which he would find Castle Linmark.

Menelik had not exaggerated when he said the horse was a good one.

He was splendid, perfect, almost matchless.

He seemed glad, too, to have a rider on his back, and one who knew how to sit him.

He tossed his head and neighed, and then stretched his lithe body out into a run which sent the ground flying away behind them at a wonderful rate.

"If I go like this," thought Patsy, "I will overtake them long before they can arrive at the castle. If I can get past them and enter the castle before they do, it will be a master stroke."

Before he started on horseback he received careful directions from Menelik about the route he was to follow; and the man had even felt assured of the spot where he thought Patsy would overtake the others; but the young detective had not thought to ask if there was a short-cut anywhere by which he could head them off.

Patsy had eaten heartily at the house, and he had brought away with him enough food to keep him going until he could secure more, so he was in good spirits; he even lighted a cigar as he rode along, and puffed at it merrily.

"I would like to know how the king is feeling about now?" he told himself once. "I wonder if he has heard anything about the events that happened so swiftly?"

He wondered, too, what Adelina was doing, and if she were worried about him; and if Fritz had yet received the message the conductor had promised to send.

The road he was traveling was a good one.

It ascended the mountain by gentle slopes, and the horse found no difficulty in keeping up the pace on such a grade.

In fact, the horse seemed not to mind the hills at all, but rather to enjoy them, and as the day wore on and still the animal showed no signs of fatigue, Patsy began to realize that he had indeed secured a jewel.

It was an hour past noon when Patsy started with the horse, and by four o'clock he entered upon a stretch of country as primitive, save for the modern road through it, as any Western wilderness in America.

But he pulled up sharply for a moment, when, upon rounding a curve in the pass, he came upon the spot that Menelik had described to him and the place where he ought to overtake and pass the count and his party.

"By Jove!" he muttered to himself, "I have certainly come thirty miles, for that is the distance Menelik said it was to this place. The count cannot be very far ahead of me now. He and his companions had almost two hours start of me—no, a little more

than an hour. It won't do to come upon them too suddenly. I must be a little more cautious."

The borders of the roadway were fringed by turf and sod, and he guided his horse upon one of these edges, and let him take it a bit easier, so that the ring of his hoofs on the road might not be heard at a distance away.

"The horse hasn't turned a hair, either," Patsy told himself presently.

Keeping him carefully upon the soft places he hurried onward again, and at last, after a quarter of an hour more he came to the top of a hill where the road led downward through a hollow and then again up a steeper hill on the opposite side of it.

And he pulled rein quickly, for down at the very bottom of the hollow he discovered the men and horses he was following.

His own horse discovered them also, and Patsy reached out and seized his nose just in time to prevent a loud neigh from echoing across the gully and warning them of his nearness.

There were the three wagons and the four horses that Menelik had described, with the double team and its four passengers in the lead.

Patsy figured that it was a little more than half a mile to the bottom of the gully, and even a greater distance to the top of it on the other side, from the bottom; and he knew that the horses ahead of him must already be tired, and would therefore go up that steep hill very slowly, and doubtless with frequent stops to breathe and rest.

Then he looked around him on the right and the left; and he discovered at his right hand what seemed to be a wood road leading upward and going apparently around the gully, which seemed to grow shallower as it advanced in that direction.

"I've a notion to chance it," was his thought; and then with sudden determination, and having considered the lay of the land thoroughly, he turned his horse into the wood road, and started him on again at a canter up the gentle slope ahead of him.

The moss upon which the feet of the horse pressed as he went forward gave back not the slightest sound: the trees that surrounded him on every side were of primitive growth, and there was no underbrush to impede his progress.

Presently he discovered with delight that the road wound around like a bended bow, toward the main road again, always skirting the gully which, as he advanced, gradually disappeared.

For almost an hour he rode on in this manner, and then, suddenly, and without warning that he was near it, he came out again upon the main road; and he knew that it was the road he had left only a short time ago.

Instantly he stopped his horse and leaped from the saddle to the ground; and then he bent forward to examine the roadway carefully.

"No one has passed here to-day, that's certain," he said, after a little; and he vaulted into the saddle again and sped onward, knowing that now he was in advance of the others, and that he would arrive at the castle long in advance of them.

After another half-hour, he paused at the top of a hill to let his horse breathe—for he was in no particular haste now; and chancing to turn in his saddle and look backward, he saw three miles at least on the back track, the three vehicles just issuing from the woods at the top of a hill he had lately passed himself.

He got himself instantly out of sight; and after that he rode on at his leisure, letting the splendid horse take his own gait.

It was not yet quite dark when he came in sight of the castle; and a little farther on he passed a field where there was excellent pasture and where a stream of water ran through it.

Here he got down and led the horse to a gate, taking him through it.

Then he rode across the field to a wood that was at the opposite side of it, and having found a place where he could hide the bridle and the saddle, he turned the horse loose to wander about and feed as he would until he should return for him, or in case he did not do that, until he should be discovered and claimed by the owner.

He knew there was food and water and grass there in plenty, so he had no misgivings about leaving the animal.

Before him, a little more than a mile distant, as he turned away, loomed the castle.

But Patsy did not take to the highway again.

Instead, he kept to the woods and skirted the hill around until he came to a point at last that was directly in the rear of the castle, and about half a mile from it.

From there he commanded a view of all the approaches; and he sat himself down to watch until it should be dark enough for him to begin his own advance.

For Patsy knew now exactly what he intended to do.

He had recalled perfectly all that the king had told him about the secret way into the castle under the moat, and he knew that he was at that moment, although half a mile from the castle walls, within less than thirty rods of the entrance to that secret passage.*

But for the king's memories of his boyhood and his fondness at that time for the then Count Von Linmark, father to the present count, the king might have lost his crown, or, at least, a great part of the territory over which he ruled.

The twilight deepened into night.

Darkness settled down over the earth, lighted only by the myriad of stars that glowed in the sky, for there was no moon.

At last Patsy rose from the moss-covered rock where he had been seated, and stretching himself, started away toward the spot he believed it would not be difficult to find, although he had never sought it before.

Presently he came upon a spot that looked as if a mighty upheaval of the earth had at some time in the past torn it asunder.

Rocks were piled upon rocks helter-skelter, in a chaos of confusion, and the surroundings were wild indeed.

"This is exactly the place that the king described to me," he mused, as he paused for a moment. "Now let me recall what else he said. Oh, yes. This:

"'Get the topmost point of the highest rock of them all, squarely in line with the middle tower of the castle and so far beneath it that you can see the edge of the moat over it. Advance from there in a straight line, keeping the same rock in line with the middle tower, until the tower is blotted out by the rock; then turn sharply to the right and walk on until you can see the middle tower again, through an opening in the rocks that will show itself; then turn sharply toward the left and follow again toward the tower until it is once more blotted out; then turn again sharply to the right and go forward until the same tower appears again through another opening, and then directly beneath your view of the tower you will discover, straight ahead of you, a flat rock that stands on edge. There are bushes growing there, or were, when I was a boy; but behind the edge of that upright flat rock is the entrance to the tunnel under the moat.'"

And the king had added after that:

"It may be that you will not be able to find it. It may be that the tunnel is choked now, but it was once there, for I passed through it, and I doubt if Count Herbert knows of its existence. He was not born then."

All this had been told to Patsy when he started for the castle that other time that has been referred to, when he took the count back to Breslin as a prisoner of the king.

But it was to stand him in good stead now, nevertheless, although he made no use of it on the occasion of that other expedition.

He found the highest rock, as he had been directed to do, and after that followed carefully all the directions that the king had given him; and at last he came to where the big rock which had been described as flat, although it stood upright, was directly before him.

The bushes that the king had talked of had grown to the size of trees now; but other undergrowth had taken their places nearer the ground and the rocks.

It was already quite dark, but Patsy stepped forward fearlessly toward the rock, and after forcing his way through the bushes, arrived at the edge of it, where he paused and searched in his pocket for matches, for, unfortunately, he did not have his electric torch with him.

But as he looked around the edge of the rock by the flare of a match, he almost uttered an exclamation of joy aloud, for there directly in front of him was the unmistakable opening that the king had so perfectly described.

Without an instant of hesitation Patsy lighted a second match, and stepped forward into the opening.

CHAPTER XI.

INSIDE THE CASTLE LINMARK.

The last thing that Patsy did before entering the tunnel was to look at the face of his watch by the light of the stars, and he saw that it was exactly half-past nine.

If the prognostication of the man Menelik was correct there was yet considerable time before the count and his companions would arrive at the castle; however, Patsy knew that the party had traveled much more rapidly than Menelik had supposed they would.

That he had already proved to his own satisfaction by overtaking them where he did.

Menelik had said that they ought to reach the castle

*See No. 598.

by midnight; Patsy figured that they would be there at least two hours earlier, or about ten.

If he should himself consume half an hour or more in making his way through the tunnel beneath the moat, then he should enter the castle at about the time the count arrived.

The reader must bear in mind the fact that Patsy was entirely familiar with the interior of Castle Linmark, once he got inside of it. It must not be forgotten that he had at one time not so long ago spent forty-eight hours there, in company with his wife and Fritz and Zita, and that then the count was absent, and Patsy had ample opportunity to study the interior of the huge pile to his heart's content, and almost at his leisure.*

This knowledge he now believed would stand him well in hand in what he aimed to do, for he had indeed planned a desperate undertaking, and one which nobody but Nick Carter himself or one of his assistants would have thought of venturing upon.

But we who have followed him in this chase know just how he suddenly found himself left utterly alone and without assistance to cope against the conditions that the escape of the count had created.

Patsy realized thoroughly that if once the count were permitted time—and it would require only a few hours—to organize his Cretonians, the king would not only lose a fifth of the territory over which he now ruled, but he would direct the scornful eye of Europe upon him for permitting such a thing to happen.

Other kings would never understand why, having had the count at his mercy, he had not put him forever out of the way of committing more treason.

In a word, the situation was decidedly "up to Patsy."

But as we proceed we will see how he planned and how he executed his designs.

The tunnel into which he now entered bore every indication of not having been traversed for years.

The floor of it was littered with debris that had fallen from the roof. In places huge rocks and boulders, loosened by the surrounding dampness, by frost, and otherwise had fallen into the passageway from the sides and the roof so that the entire place was so nearly blocked that he found it difficult to pass at all.

In one spot he came upon an obstruction which for a time seemed entirely impassable, but by dint of great effort, after he had returned to the mouth of the tunnel for the limb of a tree to use as a lever, he finally succeeded in moving the rock aside so that there was room to pass it.

From the place of entrance behind the flat stone the tunnel descended at a steep incline which became more pronounced as he advanced until finally he came to where rough steps had been cut into the rocks.

The air, what there was of it, proved very oppressive, and as he advanced and delved deeper into the earth, dampness began to be more manifest around him until finally he had no doubt that he was beneath the moat itself.

He was presently assured of that, for the tunnel soon began to ascend again, and he knew that now he was approaching the castle, and unless some new obstruction which he could not overcome confronted him, he would soon be there.

But instead of meeting with more obstructions, the way became clearer and better—and perfectly dry.

The walls around him, too, were smooth, as if care had been bestowed upon them when they were created.

The steps he presently ascended rose almost to the dignity of stairs; and they kept on ascending until he believed that he must be within the walls of the castle at last.

Once he came to a landing where there was a heavy oaken door, now sadly rotted in spots, and he paused, wondering if he had not better pass through by that way; but the passage with its stairs still ascended ahead of him, and he went on, resolved to discover the end before he made other investigations.

He came to it at last, in the form of a door not unlike the one he had already passed. It confronted him on the stairs, barring his farther progress unless it were opened—and that, he presently discovered, would have been an impossible feat had not time, with its ravages of neglect and decay, been arranging it for him for many years.

The door had been securely bolted on the opposite side from where he stood once upon a time, but now, when he pushed upon and against it, the fastenings gave way almost without effort, and he passed through into a small, perfectly square room that was ceiled in oak, and at the opposite side of which, by the light of the very last match he possessed, he could see another door, and it should be said here that if Patsy had not happened to have a box of wax matches in one of his pockets when he started to explore that tunnel he would have been sadly handicapped.

As it was he had made use of the last one he pos-

*See No. 598.

sessed, and now, in the dark, he set himself to discover the means of passing this door.

This proved, fortunately, not to be difficult, although he was some time in discovering the secret of it.

The door, instead of swinging in or out of the room where he was, *lifted* vertically, as if it were somewhere between the ceiling balanced by weights.

It lifted noiselessly, too; but still the instant he found the secret of it, he paused before the bottom had been raised six inches from the floor, and then getting upon him stomach he first placed his ears and then his eyes to the aperture.

No sound whatever came to him when he listened; but when he looked he could see the reflection of a light that was burning in the apartment beyond the door.

He listened again intently, and then, as he heard nothing, he ventured to raise the door still farther, performing the act slowly and with great care, lest some noise he should make might alarm possible occupants of the room he was so stealthily entering.

But, apparently, it was for the moment, at least, unoccupied, and as soon as he had raised the door far enough, he thrust his head through the opening and assured himself of that fact.

Nor was that all of which he assured himself.

He nearly uttered an exclamation of surprise, for he found that he was peering into the very room of the castle which Count Herbert used as his private living-room, library, office for the transaction of such business as came before him. *It was the very room, in fact, in which the former capture of Count Herbert had taken place.**

Here was luck indeed! Nothing could have been better.

Moreover, the room was at the moment untenanted, although there was a lamp burning in one of the sockets of the huge iron chandelier that hung from the ceiling above the great square table in the center of it.

He stepped into the room for a moment, and, turning about, saw that the door he had raised in order to enter, was so nicely adjusted with the paneling of the room that the eye could not possibly detect its presence; and, moreover, there was a fire-screen near at hand which, by moving ever so little, he could place in such a position that it would hide the door part way, thus permitting him to leave it half-raised, and affording an excellent opportunity to escape from the room quickly, if he found it necessary to do so.

Satisfying himself of these small things which might yet prove to be of value, he tiptoed across the room to the great door which opened upon the main corridor of the castle, and pulling it gently ajar, peered out.

Here was another surprise for him.

Every lamp in the chandeliers of the huge hall was lighted.

It seemed, also, as if every retainer who belonged to the staff of the count was there.

They had been drawn up in a double line with almost soldierlike exactness, so that they stood facing each other, eyes front and at attention.

Patsy knew instantly that that could mean but one thing.

It meant that the count and his party had arrived, and that they were even then within a few steps of the huge front door which stood open, to receive the *graf*.

From where Patsy stood he could see down the length of the hall to the front door, and in a moment more Count Herbert suddenly appeared there, on the threshold, while directly behind him Patsy could distinguish the faces of the baron and others who had accompanied him.

The waiting retainers lifted their hands in salute; the count bowed and smiled upon them.

"I have returned to you," he said. "Presently I will have orders to send to you. You may retire to your several duties, but let no one in the castle sleep until I have given my permission."

Then, followed by those who accompanied him, he passed on between the double row toward the door behind which Patsy stood, an observer of this scene; and the young detective very hastily withdrew from it, ran across the room, passed behind the screen, and beyond the secret door, which he lowered so that only a slight aperture remained, through which he could hear what should pass within the room he had left.

The count, the baron, and Herren Zollern, and Morgenthal came into the room together.

"It was a hard ride," said the count, bidding them take seats.

"Hard!" ejaculated the baron. "I am almost dead."

"Refreshments will be served here presently. Yonder are wines and liquors in that buffet, and if you wish hot water, it will be brought at once. Ah! But it is good to be here again, in my own castle, with my own men around me, where I can defy the world. And I will defy it, too, baron. It is but a step to make myself a king. All the Powers will welcome the act, because it will so weaken the power of the king. He will cease at once to be a first-class power, and will fall back to third place."

"And when will you proclaim yourself, Herbert?" asked the baron.

"Now. At once. Within three days."

"And I? And Zollern? And Morgenthal? What

*See No. 368.

becomes of us? You know we have cast our lots with yours, and there is now no drawing back."

"You, baron, shall be my chancellor. Zollern shall have the command of the army, and Morgenthal shall look after the finances. For the rest, we will leave it all until we have had more time to consider."

"Will the king send an army against you?"

"He may; but I doubt it. If he should, it will be annihilated among my mountains. No; he will be too wise to attempt that—unless he can persuade the Powers to assist him—which I happen to know he cannot do."

"You *know?*"

"Yes. I have sounded the depths of my plans. I *know.*"

"So now we may address you as your majesty, sire?"

"Not yet—but soon; and I warn you all that I shall rule with an iron hand, passing out favors to those who are faithful, and stopping at nothing to rid myself of those who are not. I shall rule absolutely or not at all."

"So be it, your majesty," was the reply in unison, from all three.

And Count Herbert smiled, well pleased.

CHAPTER XII.

ON THE ROAD TO BRESLIN.

But the hour was late and the count and his friends were greatly fatigued by the exertions of the past twenty-four hours.

It was not many minutes before they began to show unmistakable signs of it, and the count said to them:

"We are all too greatly fatigued to discuss matters to-night. I will have you shown to your rooms at once. Our heads will be clearer after we have slept."

There was not a dissent to this suggestion, and at once the count rose and conducted them into the hall from where he bade them good night, having placed them in charge of his attendants.

Then he returned to the room where Patsy was waiting behind the secret door.

The count lighted a cigar and seated himself in one of the large chairs near the table, where he speedily became lost in thought, apparently.

Patsy waited for a long time wondering what the count was doing, for he could not see him from the position he occupied.

At length, however, he ventured to raise the door a little more, and finally to creep past it, still concealed by the screen he had arranged before the arrival of the count at the castle.

A glance into the room assured him that all that caution was unnecessary, for the count was leaning back in his chair with his legs stretched across another one, the cigar had dropped from his fingers to the floor and gone out; the count was asleep.

The fatigues of the day had been too much even for him, and, although he had seated himself there to think upon his plans, he was now dreaming of them, doubtless.

Patsy rose and drew silently nearer to him, wondering how soundly the count was sleeping, and if he were easily disturbed; but as he moved cautiously about the room and the count made no sign, he presently came to the conclusion that it would require more than an ordinary noise to arouse the man.

The young detective had thought a great deal about this moment during the hours of his ride across the mountains, his passage of the tunnel, and his stay inside the palace, and he was in a sense prepared for it.

He had no chloroform with which to stupefy the man, and he knew that in a hand to hand struggle the odds would be so nearly even between them, for the count was a man of great strength, that he had no right, under the circumstances, to risk such a thing if it could be avoided.

Patsy had managed to secure, since he reached the castle, several pieces of wire cord which he had removed from the backs of paintings that stood about the sides of the room against the walls, and now, with great care, he made slip-knots at one of the ends of two of them and having passed these gently over the count's feet where they were stretched across the second chair, he pulled them as taut as he could without creating a pressure upon the count's ankles to awaken him.

Then he led the ends back under that chair, and also beneath the one upon which the man was seated, and wound them round and round the legs of it.

Next, he took one hitch—some people would call it a loop—in a third cord, and slowly dropped it over the count's head until it rested on his shoulders; and he brought the ends around back of the chair where he could hold them in his hands and pull or jerk upon them, as he saw fit.

This loop was so arranged that the instant the count sought to rise, if he should do so, the loop around his throat would tighten and choke him, thus shutting off the possibility of his crying out, or rising. In fact, the man, by reason of this loop, even without the other two that were around his ankles, was absolutely at Patsy's mercy.

Then Patsy tiptoed to the door that opened upon the corridor, and locked it securely; and then, he passed behind the count's chair again; seized the ends of the cord that was around the victim's neck, and suddenly jerked them tight.

The count started awake, tried to rise, and sought to cry out; but the cruel cord that pressed against his neck held him as in a vise, and strangled him, as well as frightened him; and Patsy continued to choke him, in silence and in mystery, until his struggles became weak and of no account.

Then, loosening the cords just a little, he made it fast around the frame of the chair; and then he spoke, but still without showing himself.

"Count," he said, "I am the gipsy, Tricio. If you wish to continue to live, you will remain absolutely silent. If you cry out, or attempt to do so, you must take the consequences. The slightest exertion of any kind on your part will be the signal for me to go to extreme measures. You understand?"

The count gasped out something which Patsy could not understand, for the cord was still much too tight about the other's throat for comfort; and then the young detective sought more pictures from the walls, and with other cords, made slipnooses which he drew tightly around the count's wrists and finally managed to draw his hands behind him so that they were utterly useless.

Next he fashioned a gag which he forced into the count's mouth and tied at the back of his neck; and after that he bandaged the count's eyes so tightly that he could see nothing.

When all was in readiness, Patsy seized the ends of the cords that were looped around the count's ankles, and also holding the end of the cord that was looped around his throat, and then he ordered him to rise and obey orders.

The count was absolutely helpless.

With the slightest pressure against the loop around the man's throat, Patsy could choke him; with the slightest pull upon the cords that connected with the loops around the count's ankles, he could trip and throw him on his face.

Then Patsy seized one of the hand-lamps from the table, having already lighted it for the purpose, and sternly telling the count to walk before him and to do as he was ordered to do, they passed through the secret door which Patsy closed after him, and then past the oaken door into the tunnel that led beneath the moat.

There was never a word spoken save when Patsy said briefly:

"There are steps ahead of you; be careful in descending them;" or, "Turn to the right," or "the left," or "there are steps to ascend," etc.

And thus they passed the tunnel to the outer air, arriving there, as Patsy saw by his watch, a little before one o'clock in the morning.

When they came out among the rocks at the outer entrance to the tunnel, Patsy guided the count away at once toward the field where he had left his horse.

It is true that it was extremely difficult traveling for the count. He stumbled and sometimes fell, and no doubt he would have cursed aloud had he been able to do so.

But the walk of half a mile through the starlight was finally accomplished, and then a pleasant surprise awaited the young detective.

The gallant horse that had taken him there, had found a companion, as horses will do if one is near, and, although this second horse was without saddle or bridle, Patsy managed to fashion a halter out of some of the wire cord and transferring his own saddle to the back of the new horse, he bound the count securely to it and having made him so that he could not even struggle, he mounted his own steed, and, leading the other by the halter of wire cord, passed upon the highway and turned toward the direction in which Breslin lay.

Patsy had been thoughtful enough to stuff his pockets with what remained of the luncheon that the count had provided for his guests when they reached the castle, and he looked to that to help them both over the journey they were to take, which would consume at least two nights—for Patsy realized that he could not travel in that way in daylight.

But his own horse had had sufficient rest and food and water so that he was perfectly fresh; and the one on which the count was mounted was in the same condition.

And so they galloped on and on and on through the night, up-hill and down-hill, over mountains and between them, until daylight saw them many miles from the castle, on the road to Breslin.

Shortly after daylight Patsy turned aside into the forest, and, finding a secluded place, dismounted, lifted the count down, and tied him to the trunk of a tree.

Then he removed the bandage from the count's eyes and the gag from his mouth, and fed him, and all the while, despite frequent efforts of the count to converse with him, Patsy resolutely refused to reply to any question at all, or to talk with the man.

All that day they remained hidden in the forest, but as soon as darkness fell over the land again, the journey was resumed.

All that night they traveled, eating sparingly of the food that Patsy had brought, and at dawn they went into camp a second time.

"This day, count," said Patsy to him then, "we must do without food. But you can stand it as well as I. To-night at midnight we will arrive at Breslin, and you will be delivered again to the king. Ask no questions of me, for I shall not reply."

At dark they started on once more, and as Patsy had foretold, they rode into the city as the clocks were pointing to midnight.

* * * * * * *

There is a private outside entrance to the apartments of Prince Rupert at the palace, and to that one Patsy conducted his prisoner; and he was held there until the same three men who had stood guard over him before were sent to take him back to his dungeon.

Then, and not till then, when Patsy had seen his prisoner safely confined with three men on guard over him, the prince and the young detective sought the king, had him awakened, and related to him all that had occurred.

THE END.

The next number (660) will contain "A Woman to the Rescue; or, Nick Carter's Pupil at Castle Linmark."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

Not one person in ten thousand has the faintest idea of the elaborate precautions taken by the police to preserve private property from the attentions of burglars. Every one knows that there is a network of men on their various beats while the towns and cities are fast asleep. But that is not all. Each of the midnight sentinels has a series of traps cunningly set, and the ingenuity with which they carry out this part of their vigil is surprising. The night-policeman is always at war with an unseen enemy, and his defensive line of action is so complete that practically three-quarters of the shops in London have a trap set at their door between midnight and dawn.

This is done so artfully that the inexperienced eye would never detect it, but as soon as the man in uniform passes that part of his beat again he can tell at a glance whether the door has been opened, even though admission may have been gained with the ordinary key. These traps, or "marks," as they are called in the police force, are of infinite variety, and every constable uses his own intelligence in selecting his method.

Quietly and unostentatiously he begins to fix up his system of marks as soon as he goes on duty, and after that his chief object is to see that none of the marks are disturbed during the night.

The most frequently used is a small section of a match-stalk, or a scrap of whalebone, wedged in somewhere against the edge of the door. It may be placed a couple of inches from the top, or it may be near the bottom; but if the policeman cannot find it where he left it, he knows something has happened. The rest depends upon his intelligence.

In the case of a shop or warehouse where very valuable property is being guarded, the silent sentinels are fixed up at the windows also, and on the doors at the back of the premises, so that the burglar would have infinite difficulty in entering without bringing a cordon of men in uniform round the place.

It is a constant battle of wits between the police and the skilful burglar. The latter knows quite well that the entrances are marked, and so he may spend a week carefully studying the place and noting the times at which the policeman on duty passes, before making his coup. The modern burglar makes it part of his "business" to study every little trick employed against him by his natural foe, but in spite of his cunning he may unconsciously give warning of his entry to the vigilant man in blue, and a piercing whistle in the street will inform him that he has walked into a trap.

It is by no means generally known that thousands of yards of thin black cotton are spread every night by the police in out-of-the-way places where law-abiding citizens are not likely to pass. This delicate barrier may be found a few inches from the ground in a passage leading to the backs of houses and shops, or it may be spread from tree to tree just above a tempting well.

The unsuspecting burglar who is unlucky enough to select that particular way of gaining an entry is extremely unlikely to feel the snap of the cotton which he cannot see in the dark, but if he should happen to notice it, his exit is generally more hurried than dignified.

The use of cotton is not infallible. Many a garden has been diligently searched in the small hours of the morning by a little band of policemen as a result of a stray cat snapping the barrier and giving the silent alarm.

A lonely pedestrian at night will often be struck by the fact that he does not see a policeman for a considerable time. Nevertheless he may have been narrowly scrutinized a dozen times by unseen eyes, specially if he be in the metropolis. At night the policeman adopts entirely different methods from those used when the sun is shining. His rubber-soled boots are but one form of the system of secrecy and silent watchfulness that is necessary.

The night-officers take a pride in their strange work. They do not all catch a burglar every week; many a man has spread his traps for ten years in London without catching one, but he lives in hopes and never relaxes his guard. If he finds all his marks undisturbed at dawn, he feels he can go to bed with an easy conscience.

On the Brink of the Gorge.

BY ERNEST A. CARR.

"I say, Pug, come here—quick! There's a pair of chipmunks under that big pine just the other side of the fence!"

Pug, or, to give him his baptismal name, Leslie Frederick Willoughby—crossed his father's enclosure, and, sitting beside his cousin, peered through a gap in the rough, high fence. The vast forest that encircled the mining-settlement of Jacksonville extended to within a few feet of the place where the two boys crouched; and at the foot of the nearest pine a couple of ground-

squirrels were running to and fro in quest of cones and beechnuts.

"What fun it would be to catch them!" whispered Cecil Akers. He was a town-bred boy from Illinois, and he found this visit to his uncle in the most mountainous part of California rich in thrilling experiences.

"I've had chipmunks before now—Manuel caught me a pair last spring," Pug replied, under his breath, pressing the squat nose, to which he owed his nickname, against the rail in his eagerness to follow the movements of the little bright-eyed creatures.

"Who's Manuel?" whispered his cousin.

"One of our mounted messengers. Such a fine chap, but awful quiet—there! you've scared 'em," Pug broke off crossly.

The chipmunks had suddenly stopped their gambols and sat up, listening. Next instant they scampered off and darted into their burrows.

"I never moved, Pug—really, I never," was Cecil's whispered protest.

"Yes, you must have done," Pug persisted; "there's no one else about."

The town boy peered timidly into the dusk of the wood.

"How far do those trees go?" he asked.

"Right up to the 'San Jo' gorge. I say, Cecil, we'll go there to-morrow, to the slings. I've never seen them yet."

"What are they?"

"Why, they're——" Pug stopped and gripped his companion's arm. "Look right there, other side of that redwood! Men, ain't they?"

Cecil could just discern something moving softly in the shadows.

"Ain't they uncle's men?" he asked, in wonder.

"Guess not." Pug sniffed suspiciously. "Father's men are all at the mines. There ain't half a dozen folk in the place just now, I reckon."

Cecil's lower lip began to tremble.

"I say, Pug," he asked tremulously, "what—what'll we do?"

"Come inside," his cousin said decidedly.

They hurried into the little wooden house, bolted both doors, and dropped the heavy bar across its solitary window. Then Pug, standing on a stool, managed to haul down the double-barreled gun from its slings over the fireplace.

"Let's get into the loft," he said softly, starting at the sound of his own voice.

And together they mounted the ladder to the room in the pitch of the roof, dragging the gun with them.

"But p'raps they ain't coming here!" urged the Illinois lad, as he helped to close the trap-door.

"Looks awful like it," Pug answered reflectively. "It'll be pay-day for our gangs next Thursday. I saw dad's riders bring in the money on Monday; that's it in the heavy little box on the floor—and I'm guessing that's what they're after."

He flung open the stout shutter of the loft and peered out. Two men were quietly mounting his father's fence, and a third stood just beside it waiting for them. Startled by the grating squeak of the shutter's rusty hinge, they looked up; one of them put his hand to his hip, but the man in the enclosure hoarsely bade him "quit foolin'."

"Do ye want ter raise the hull mine on us?" he said fiercely. "This ain't no shootin'-job. Wait while I bluff them boys—easy 'nough, I reckon."

He raised his voice.

"Hoi, you young imps o' blackness, come daown an' open this yere door, or I'll put a bullet through ye in double quick time! Come daown, I say, or I'll hev to come up to ye!"

Cecil, too terrified for tears, crouched down on the floor in horror at the savage threats that followed; and Pug, as he ducked out of sight, shook in every limb. But he set his teeth hard, and, sitting on the floor, managed to raise the firearm, supporting it on the woodwork of the opening. With trembling fingers he drew back the hammers, rested the butt on his shoulder, and pulled both triggers.

There was a loud report that echoed and reechoed among the hollows; two charges of swanshot spattered harmlessly among the tree-tops, and Leslie Willoughby and the gun tumbled over a mixed heap, to his cousin's mortal alarm.

"Oh, you're shot—you're killed! Pug's killed!" and Cecil burst out crying.

"Stow that, Cecie," said Pug, picking himself up and pressing his sleeve to his bleeding nose.

A succession of heavy, pounding blows shook the rafters.

"They're breaking in the door," he continued, with growing alarm. "I hope father's men'll come up quick—they are sure to have heard the gun. Them fellows'll kill us if they get in here!" His fortitude gave way at last, and he ran to the opening, screaming: "Dad! Help! He-elp!"

The door gave way with a crash, and the huddled pair of youngsters heard hurrying footsteps beneath them.

"Hustle around!" said one of the men, "time's purty scarce, you bet!"

"It's in the loft—up them steps," cried another voice.

Next minute shouts and footsteps sounded outside the front of the house.

"Scoot, lads!" one of the robbers cried.

There was a tramping rush to the shattered door, more shouting, and the "crack! crack!" of pistols. Pug starting excitedly to his feet, saw the three robbers stampede across the enclosure, vault the fence, and take to their heels. The last to do so, a villainous-looking man with a long mustache, faced about and took a hasty shot with his revolver at the boy's white face. The bullet struck the shutter with a loud rap, and the ruffian turned and ran for his life.

The first of his pursuers was young Manuel d'Alcaras, a handsome, athletic Mexican. He disappeared in the wood, followed by others, and shots were heard from some way off. Presently a score or so of the miners returned to the house.

"Well done, my boy," said Mr. Willoughby, when his son's story was told. "But this is extraordinary; there has been nothing like it in the district for six or seven years. Who could they have been?"

Manuel came forward; he was very pale, and blood dripped slowly down from a roughly bandaged wound in his knee.

"Pardon, señor," he said; "they are el Capitano's gang from beyond the Sierra Nevada. I would have captured el Capitano himself, but he lamed me with a bullet and escaped—this time."

"You know the 'captain,' then, Manuel?" asked Mr. Willoughby.

The young man's brows lowered, and he flushed darkly.

"He killed my only brother, señor," he said. "And I have vowed to avenge Juan's death."

Seven months had passed since the visit of the dreaded "Captain Hare" to Jacksonville, and the excitement it aroused in that quiet settlement had waned and died.

Early one spring evening Leslie Willoughby was trudging along the track that led to the San Joaquin gorge. He was feeling lonely, for Cecil Akers had gone back to his mother in Illinois, and Pug had never longed for his own dead mother more than when Cecil's first letter from home arrived.

Clambering a steep slope, Pug came suddenly in full view of the gorge. It was a strange and even awful sight. Sheer away from where he stood the ground dropped like a cliff to the rocky bed of the foaming San Joaquin River, five hundred feet below. Across the wide cañon another lofty line of cliff faced him, and rocks and forests closed in the horizon on all sides.

But what fascinated the boy's gaze was the stout wire rope that spanned the vast, wind-swept gulf before him. At last, then, he had reached the famous "San Jo" slings!

Imagine a pair of wide shoulder-straps depending, by a running pulley, from a taut rope crossing a mighty chasm. To these loops is attached a belt of stout webbing, secured by a strong clasp. To get across one must buckle on the belt, slip an arm through each loop, and haul one's self along hand over hand by slack guide-ropes conveniently within reach. Conceive the breathless, the thrilling excitement of slowly crossing thus in mid-air, hanging between earth and sky, like Mahomet's coffin, and always with the thought, "Suppose the rope or the slings gave way!" to keep your heart throbbing. Picture all this, and you will understand the feverish fascination—half-eagerness, half-fear—with which Pug Willoughby donned the slings and belt, and launched himself on his aerial voyage.

It was trying work, pulling himself along by the cords; the slings were too large for him, and he had to haul in a cramped fashion that made his arms ache terribly. When he reached the opposite side he was dizzy and exhausted, and then he recalled the fact that he must cross again to get home!

He walked a little way from the edge to recover his nerve, and sat down to rest for a while. At last, feeling anything but fit, yet dreading the fall of night before he could reach home, he buckled himself in the stays again, and began dragging the pulley, inch by inch almost, toward the home side.

When half-way across he noticed a man standing at the landing-point, but on nearing the side, Pug saw that the figure had vanished.

He had approached to within a foot of the edge, when a man darted round a boulder close by him, stretched out a sinewy arm, and clasped the suspended boy by the throat.

Paralyzed with fright, Pug yet could recognize the ruffian who had fired at him on the day of Captain Hare's raid.

"So I've got yer, hev I, young spitfire?" cried the man, with a chuckle. "I missed yer once, but I don't mean doin' it again. You an' me'll be quits this time, I reckon."

Pug started a scream, but the grip on his throat instantly tightened, almost choking him.

"Do that agen—only once more," said his captor, with an evil sneer, "an' daown ye go, over an' under, to the 'San Jo,' at the bottom there—or ontu the rocks! We'll hev no noise this bout. Reckon you ain't got no double-barrel gun abaout you this time; hev ye? Cold steel'll do the trick neat, an' make no row to set folk after me."

As he spoke he drew a short-bladed knife from its sheath on his thigh, and flourished it in his disengaged right hand. The boy struggled desperately, but in vain; the suffocating grasp could not be shaken off. He saw the steel flash, and closed his eyes.

"This'll put us level," muttered the ruffian, the hideous rage of murder gleaming in his eyes as he raised the blade.

A pebble rolled tinkling across the path and bounded into the gulf. Startled by the noise, the man looked round, to find himself face to face with Manuel d'Alcaras! The messenger stood leaning forward beyond a projecting boulder, a cocked revolver in his right hand. Slowly the cruel knife was lowered; there was a long pause; the two men remained motionless, their eyes fixed on each other.

The Mexican was the first to break the silence, and Pug opened his eyes with revived hope.

"So, *Capitano, mio,*" the younger man said quietly, "we meet again—for the last time. The lad here you will at once release, or I will shoot you like a dog. The game is mine to-day; what avails your knife against my pistol?"

With his left hand he aided Pug to the bank, the shining muzzle of his weapon pointed full at the desperate "captain" meanwhile. Panting and trembling, the boy took off the belt and slings; then, at a word from his rescuer, ascertained by a glance that the other had no firearm.

"I might shoot you down in cold blood, as you shot my brother," said d'Alcaras slowly; "but, cur as you are, I'll give you a chance for your life. Now"—to Pug—"young master, home—as fast as you can."

The boy dared not disobey his friend's look of grave command. He turned and ran down the home path. Three hundred yards or so away the track mounted a ridge overlooking the shelf on which the enemies stood. Looking back in horrified fascination, Pug saw d'Alcaras hurl his revolver far across the gorge and draw a glittering knife from his left side.

Then he and the desperado advanced stealthily toward each other—and Pug ran home in terror.

* * * * * * *

An hour later Manuel stumbled into the township, ghastly white, and with two terrible wounds in his left arm. He whispered to Pug as the boy anxiously drew near: "My brother is—avenged!"

Then he fainted. Neither during his illness, nor after, did he breathe another word as to the fight by the gorge.

The "captain's" body was never discovered. Probably the rapid torrent of the San Joaquin had borne it far away below the gorge ere Manuel reached the settlement. And unless the Mexican speaks, which is less likely than ever, the true history of that terrible duel on the brink of the gorge will never be written. But Leslie Willoughby has seen it often in his dreams.

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